

# CROSSING PATHS: WHERE TRANSGENDER AND RELIGION MEET

From the Unitarian Universalist Association's  
Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns



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# Preface

I believe there is power in all words: drawn, signed, spoken, sung, and written. People who have struggled with transgender identity and issues wrote this powerful collection of words for you. Some of these people are transgender themselves, others are activists, allies, educators; friends, ministers, and relatives; some fit into more than one of these categories.

When I think back on my own life thus far and answer the question, “*Where do you get your courage?*,” I can truthfully answer that my courage stems from the foundation my Unitarian Universalist church and faith have bestowed upon me. I have met too many people in my lifetime who cannot say the same. This collection is my attempt to remind all of us that religious people are involved in transgender issues and transgender people are leading religious lives. We lead intersecting lives, where paths cross and plurality begins.

*I am grateful to all the people who took a chance and contributed to this collection. It is my hope that it will make a difference in the world in which we live. May you find some of the words contained in this collection comforting and others challenging and still others thought provoking. And always, remember that you hold in yourself the power to change the world.*

In faith,  
Mr. Barb Greve  
*Program Associate, Office of Bisexual, Gay,  
Lesbian and Transgender Concerns*

# Introduction

Transgender people challenge so many of our assumptions. I write as a straight, black, able-bodied man. But when I say “our” assumptions here, I mean, of course the assumption of non-transgender people, like me.

Unitarian Universalism has done a great deal of work on the “categories”, Black/White, Gay/Straight, Disabled/Abled. It is around gender issues however, that we can point to our greatest success. Early acceptance of, and later affirmation of women’s empowerment, gender inclusive language, men’s work understanding male privilege, more than half of our active clergy are women. Though we have more work to do on gender, ours is a record to be proud of.

We have developed some capacity to look at how our society gives privilege to some categories (male, white, able bodied, anglo, straight) and is oppressive others. We most often think about this work on categories as justice making and it certainly is. We’ve gotten comfortable in this conversation.

But there is a deeper theological issue here. The affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Transgender people push us out of our comfort zone. At least they push me out of my comfort zone. Their lives challenge the concept of category. I used to think of gender as immutable, unchanging. It seemed the most basic division of the human family. “Male and Female He Created Them.”

When I began actually paying attention several years ago, I realized that I had some work to do. I needed information, yes. But I gradually, also realized that transgender people were eliciting reactions in me I was neither proud of, nor understood. Luckily, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns was able to help, by allowing me to attend a training for UUA staff on the issue. Well, truth be told, it took me two of the training sessions to begin to understand my reaction.

This manual is intended to offer you, and your congregation, a resource to help you begin sorting through your feelings and reactions.

Though Transgender people are few among us, their presence calls us to, yet again, discern what it means to live out our values. Last year, two of our congregations settled the first “out” transgender ministers in our movement. We are taking beginning steps toward tolerance.

But our theology, our faith, calls us to a standard higher than tolerance. Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even those who make us uncomfortable, calls us to examine our assumptions, to recognize our prejudices and preconceptions, to gather information we need, and to move into honest relationship with “the other.”

Our goal is to live as one human family on this small blue planet. I believe this manual can help us recognize the blessing of real, lived human experience.

We have much to be proud of. But our work is not done.

In faith,

Rev. William G. Sinkford

*President, Unitarian Universalist Association*

# Sorry, I'm in the Wrong Room

—Alex Myers

Between the conscious and subconscious, the explained and the understood has always been the resting point of my gender identity. From earliest childhood, I had a deep-seated conviction that I was, in fact, a boy. I was aware that others did not see me as such, but I also knew it was not a matter that could be put into words, that could be made explicit. Rather, I had to grow up, to become and in that process of maturing transform.

Though it sounds too stereotypical to be true, it is. When I was a child I believed everything I read, everything I was told. Thankfully, we didn't have a TV at home. This would either have led me to believe the ludicrous or, more likely, lose the ease of my belief. As it was, I read a lot. We had dozens of comic books at my house. There were the traditional comics, Archie and Uncle Scrooge, but also comic book versions of classic books like *Prisoner of Zenda* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*. The Bible too appeared in comic book form, I recall most vividly Samson fighting off his attackers with the jawbone of an ass. Amongst all these were comic book versions of Greek myths, Hercules, Jason, Ulysses. These were my favorites.

At this time, my parents wanted to introduce me and my brother to different religions and so we went to a Reform Jewish Synagogue as well as Unitarian Universalist church. Both creeds had an aversion to teaching much about God, but I did learn a number of songs, and that it was important to keep an open mind. I took this to heart, and not finding any God in these places, I found them in my Greek myths. (It is worth noting that I found no God in the comic book Bible either, except for His appearance in the burning bush). In these myths, the gods appeared just like the humans, and were frequently moved off their mountain to assist the heroes. It all sounded good to me. And so, at night, I would pull up the covers over my head and pray to Zeus and Hercules to make me a man when I grew up.

I don't know what I expected, whether I wanted an eventual, somewhat postponed destiny as a man, or rather desired to wake up the next morning transformed in a Gregor Samsa like manner. At any rate, within a year or so my faith in the Greek gods diminished. So too did my parents' ecumenical streak, I now attended Hebrew School exclusively.

Throughout the rest of my childhood, religion and gender occupied much the same place in my life. Both were slightly annoying, but I was obliged to take part. Hebrew School took place on Sunday mornings and, living in rural Maine, the closest synagogue was an hour from home. Thus, religion meant I was deprived of another day of sleeping late and was subject to carsickness on the ride there. These negatives were balanced by the fact that my father treated us to hot chocolate after Hebrew School, and the Hebrew alphabet provided a wonderful code in which to write notes at school. Gender wise, I was mistaken for a boy most of my childhood. I threw such fits when my mother brushed my hair that she finally just cut it all off. This was a joy. Almost every single storekeeper, waiter, or new acquaintance thought that I was a boy, a situation that tormented my mother and delighted me. I didn't quite see what her problem was. When I had a teacher who thought I was boy for the first term of school (she wasn't corrected until parent-teacher conferences) I was lectured on why I had to tell people I was a girl. I didn't get it. I knew I was a boy. I also knew I had to play along, and that there was no point trying to convince others of what I was. My parents were as convinced they were right as I was. I suffered through dressing up for special events and engaging in activities that were meant for girls and generally amused myself by causing mayhem in all the women's restrooms I went into.

I left the woods of Maine where I had lived my whole life to attend Phillips Exeter Academy when I was 14. Upon realizing that, indeed, there was more to life than pine trees and

cows and that people existed in a wide variety of forms, I came out as a lesbian. I announced this to a few friends and proceeded to have relationships with several women, become a vociferous feminist, and furtively attend a few lesbian avenger meetings when the opportunity arose. With equal nonchalant I continued my involvement with Judaism, there were few Jews at Exeter, but many more than there had been in Paris, Maine. I was pleased with my new communities, surrounded for the first time in my life by others who had common interests, shared rituals, mutual attractions.

With time, my initial delight wore off; beneath the surface similarities there lay profound differences. Being a Jew from Paris, Maine was not equal to being a Jew from New York City. Whereas I had spent my childhood being asked by classmates where my horns were, they had blithely assumed that most of the world was Jewish and, for that matter, most of the world drove BMWs. In the lesbian world, despite the fact that many of the women had identified as tomboys when they were kids, few shared my desire to be a man. Perhaps it was a wish they had once coveted, but they had grown out of it, whereas I found myself more and more growing into that wish.

And so it was, the summer after my junior year in high school, that I found myself in the basement of a church in a support group for GLBT youth. It was my first meeting, and the topic was, by some coincidence, gender identity. We had broken into three groups: boys, girls and transgender. I sat with the girls, listening to them talk about how some of them had been mistaken for boys as children (me too!), how they had always wanted to be as tough as the boys (me too!) how they had resented the ease with which boys could express their attraction to girls while they had to stifle theirs (me too!) but no one said that they still wanted to be a boy. Even the butchest of the group spoke of how strongly she identified as a woman, and how she hated it when waiters addressed her as 'sir,' how that experience robbed her of her identity. Her words sent my head spinning. Then it was my turn to share. I stood up. "Sorry," I said, "I think I'm in the wrong room." And I got up, walked through the door, and joined the transgender group.

A year later, after senior year at Exeter as a man, I found myself in Greece. The trip was my graduation present, I went with my friend who was Greek and, though not trans-identified, passed easily as a boy. We were on the island of Rhodes for a week, clambering through ruins, swimming in the Mediterranean and eating ice cream. On one of the island's mountaintop churches we walked the stations of the cross under a shower of pink laurel blossoms. We walked through the dank catacombs of the church, squinting in the darkness to examine wall carvings and painted icons. It was silent, heavy, and the darkness was disorienting. We emerged from the basement into the daylight; the air was sweet and the breeze cool. Tourists came and went as we sat and lunched. That night we biked to the acropolis of Rhodes. The moon was full, with not a cloud in the sky. The acropolis sat atop a hill overlooking the old city of Rhodes. All that remained of the main temple to Zeus was a corner, two complete columns and one broken in half, jagged in relief against the night sky. The stadium had been reconstructed and signs marked where the temple to Heracles and Athena had been. A wind rustled the pine trees as we climbed to the top of the stadium, gazing at the skeletal columns. A car of Greek teenage girls drove, shouting and honking. I asked my friend what they had said, "Any handsome men up here? No, just some little boys," was the translation. Enjoying the coolness of the air, I sat in the ruins in silence. Slowly I realized that here I was, in Greece, a man. I thought back to those nights under the covers praying to the gods the ruins of whose temples I was now sitting in. Had they answered my prayers? Had my childhood dreams been fulfilled?

Certainly I had not envisioned it this way when I was six. My transition at age seventeen to life as a man was marked by nothing more dramatic than my asking to be called Alex instead of Alice. There was no surgery, no hormones, not even a haircut. I had simply left one room for another, finally refused to ever wear a dress again, and returned to class at Exeter following boys'

dress code: a coat and tie every day to class. Had I imagined something more dramatic, like being struck by some gender bending equivalent of Cupid's arrow or Zeus' lightning bolt? But here I was, living and passing everyday without effort. This is what I had asked the gods for.

It has been seven years now that I have lived as a man. I still pass easily in everyday life, though I am most often thought to be sixteen years old. As I write this I am, in fact, procrastinating from my scholarly work, my pursuit of a Ph.D. in Judaic studies. Daily now I read the Bible and the Mishnah, study Plato and the early church fathers. On Fridays I attend conservative Jewish services; sitting in the back row in a tie and yarmulke and I am indistinguishable from the other members. In class we dissect ancient texts, pull apart the words to explicate the theology, consider the social setting and the motives of the writer. God and gods are all around me in my daily life. Books written by inspired men, passions splashed across the page as everyone searches for his own meaning.

And, like prayer, I am still caught between the conscious and the unconscious, what is explained and what is understood. Fascinated by what is not said, wondering whether speech predicates existence. For certainly physical reality does not, for I say I am a man, and indeed I am. What is formless is better, and though we are said to be made in God's image we are never told what God's image is. Therefore at night, and in the morning and whenever I pray I am not entirely sure whether I am thinking of a moonlit hill in Greece and the gods that did and do still live there, or whether my thoughts reach the vaults of heaven and the Holy One, Blessed be He.

# Transcendence

—Rev. Paige Getty

*It's just weird.*

*It makes me uncomfortable.*

*Why do they have to be so in-your-face about it?*

*Why can't they just accept who God made them to be?*

Most discussions which acknowledge gender(s) outside the socially acceptable feminine and masculine ones (woman, man, girl, boy) are shrouded in the discomfort—and often fear—of the unknown. Indeed, there remains a vast and general ignorance about what transgender is, beyond our limited exposure to Hollywood's representation of transvestites and cross-dressers. Therefore, many initial reactions to the real-life introduction of authentic transgender people often involve sentiments such as the ones above. Many of us who identify comfortably with the gender typically assigned to our biological sex simply are discomfited by the existence of those persons who challenge our collective, societal certainty about the relationship between gender and biological sex.

The discomfort about transgender is understandable. After all, except perhaps for a select few (who exist, I've heard, but whom I've never met) every single person is born with a gender, assigned by someone else and based on perceived biological sex. From the moment we are born—and often before that—our very identity is gendered, to the point that parents are offended if their infant male child is called a girl or vice versa. From our given names, to the clothes we wear, to the expected roles we play, our existence is gender-dependent. And our language certainly is gendered. Try speaking for five minutes about a friend or family member without using even one distinctly feminine or masculine pronoun or referent. This gender mentality is so ingrained that the very idea of someone having a gender identity seemingly opposed to their biological sex designation is utterly unfathomable to many people.

Our discomfort with the unfamiliar is natural. But this discomfort is not a valid excuse for consciously choosing to remain ignorant. After all, we Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on our open-mindedness and our use of reason, and we do not reinforce the status quo simply because it is easier to do so. No, we inform ourselves fully, and we speak the truths we have learned. Admittedly, though, the difficulty of informing ourselves about transgender rests in the fact that transgender is best known through relationship and experience and not through disembodied verbiage. A theoretical, intellectual understanding simply is not sufficient.

In my life, such lessons have transpired through experiences outside the formal classroom or workshop setting. In casual, relaxed interactions with other people, I have gained insight into the complexities of human nature and the common struggles we share. In these interactions we are the most honest and authentic with ourselves and each other. And it is through such experiences and relationships that I have learned truths about transgender. These truths, in fact, are truths about being human.

How easy it is for us to make assumptions about others and their choices, to make accusations of weirdness and in-your-face-ness. How easy to ask people to make choices that make *us* feel more comfortable. How easy to point fingers and relinquish responsibility for our own biases and tendencies. But when we open ourselves to the opportunity to *know* people, such attitudes are decidedly more difficult.

Through genuine relationship my own misunderstandings about transgender have been corrected. No longer is the “transgender otherness” any different than a normal, human otherness.

Rather, I have a greater understanding of myself and my own relationship to gender identity. And I have a greater appreciation for the individual's ability to know oneself and for the courage it has taken for transgender people to honor that selfhood despite a near universal lack of acceptance or support. It is a true transcendence of gender as we have understood it.

My dedication as a Unitarian Universalist to the advocacy of transgender rights—indeed, to transgender visibility—is not rooted solely in our widely popular first principle (that we will affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person), for we can affirm one's worth and dignity without true acceptance or support. Rather, I am called more strongly by two of our other principles:

**We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...**

*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.* This principle, I believe, affirms our individual and collective right to seek truth in our lives. This truth extends both outward and inward, informing our communal relationships, our understanding about faith and divinity, and our understanding about ourselves. Therefore, when a person knows that their own gender is different from that which is socially accepted, we must honor that personal knowledge. Perhaps science knows how to define biological or genetic sex characteristics, but true gender is known only to the individual.

*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.* Once we acknowledge and affirm the above principle, we also must remember that spiritual growth is central to the purpose of our congregations and our Association. And if we are to affirm each other's right to growth—and assist in that growth, as well as our own—we must accept each other. Then, we truly will learn and grow.

As we work diligently against the abundance of oppressions in our society, we are distinctly aware of the great lack of public awareness about transgender identity. Although analyses vary, there is an extensive understanding of racism. The normalcy of homosexuality is more prevalent in mainstream society, on television, and in movies. So, what can you do in your congregation to begin to be more explicitly welcoming and open to the transgender people in your community?

- ◆ Install non-gendered restroom facilities on your church property (handicapped-accessible restrooms often do this by default). How would it feel to you if only men's rooms or only women's rooms were available?
- ◆ Pay attention to the use of language in worship services and other activities. Do not ask women to sing one verse of a hymn and men to sing another—a transgender person is categorically omitted.
- ◆ Ask questions. Especially when we attempt to reach out to new groups of people, it probably is good policy for every participant in our congregations to ask questions..(what?) So ask, "What can we do to meet your needs as a member of our community?"
- ◆ Discuss and learn the usage and nuances of transgender language and terms, such as the following: female, male, intersex, man, woman, third gender, transgender, transsexual, transvestite.

# Transparent

—Anonymous

“Guess what, Catherine!” My daughter Rose’s voice, shrill with excitement, carries through the room. We are in Breezewood, Pennsylvania. It is the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving and the mediocre restaurant is full of weary travelers. “When you grow up, you can have a doctor turn you into a boy if you want to!”

My partner Anne and I look around nervously at the people around us. Anne fixes her gaze on me and raises an eyebrow, as if to say, “YOU did this.” She is still upset that, a few days earlier, I imparted this piece of information to our child. I give an invisible shrug and listen. “I’m going to do that!” continues Rose. “I might, too,” replies my niece, but with little of Rose’s amazement or excitement.

My partner does not think this is age appropriate information for a four year old. I don’t know. I only know that a few nights before, lying with her at bedtime, when I asked Rose, “What do you hope Santa will bring you for Christmas?” she answered my question with a question, very seriously. “Mom...could Santa Claus ever turn a girl into a boy?” I felt that she deserved an equally serious answer. “Yes,” I said, “but only grownups. Sometimes grownup women decide that they want to be a man and they have a doctor help them.” My daughter is aquiver with interest and excitement, almost ecstatic. “HOW DO THEY DO THAT?” she shouts. “I’ll tell you all about that when you’re twelve,” I respond, a standard reply in our house for complex questions.

After this conversation, Rose keeps gender change before her as an option whenever she discusses her future. “Well, I might be a soldier if I’m a boy,” she says, “But I don’t want to be a soldier if I’m a girl.”

Since she was a baby, people have assumed that Rose was a boy. When she was a baby, and Anne and I (two femmes) still got to choose her clothes, people on the street would lean over her stroller, take in her pink flowered OshKosh overalls, and say, “Well, hello, little fella!” At the park, mothers would turn to us from the bench thirty feet away and say, “He’s an active little guy!” We never corrected them, because we felt that people cut Rose a lot more slack to be the rough and tumble child that she is when they thought she was a boy.

As soon as Rose could select her own clothes, the pink overalls were set aside. At home, she might wear a dress or a tutu for fun, but out in the world she is strictly a sweatpants and polo shirts gal. A standard response to a piece of clothing that comes into the house is, “Would a BOY wear this?”

When we went to her teachers’ conference at her preschool, the teachers reported nervously that “Most of the kids don’t believe that Rose is a girl.” They looked at two lesbian Moms and asked, “Do *you* ever wear dresses?” Swallowing my irritation, I replied, “I do, quite a bit. And one day when I said to Rose, ‘But, look, *I* like to wear dresses!’ she replied, ‘That’s great that you respond to them, Mom. I don’t.’ and that was the end of the subject.”

But clothes are the least of it. What I notice about Rose is that, in imaginary play, her identity of choice is ALWAYS male. It used to surprise me, now I take it for granted. She’s never the mom, always the dad. She’s Karl Karl, the boy puppy. She’s Sir Robert, Knight Errant. I don’t know if this is true at school, but at home I am now very surprised if she chooses a female role in imaginative play. Her frequent playmates who are girls accept this and play Maid Marion to her Robin Hood. The boys and she run too fast for me to know their play identities.

One day, reading a giveaway local parents’ magazine, mostly to see if there are good events going on at the libraries or anything, I am startled to come across an article entitled, “Gender Variant Children.” The man who wrote it, a local psychiatrist, runs a group for the

parents of these kids. I catch my breath in excitement, until I read all the way through. By the end, I am disappointed to learn that there are no parents of girls in the group. It is all parents of boys who love Barbie dolls and make-up and lip-synching to Brittany Spears. It's harder to tell with girls, says the article, because somewhere between  $\frac{1}{3}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  of girls are "tomboys" and identify with boys.

I wish they had said that a little differently. I wish they had said that, in a world where everything from diapers to clothes to toys, have been assigned gender, the boys' assignment is infinitely more interesting and many girls choose it. We buy a 'boy's toothbrush' because I think Buzz Lightyear is more fun than Barbie to look at every day! Sometime, when you are feeling brave, go to Toys R Us and look at the toys. Literally, there are aisles called "Boys Toys" which are all action figures, superheroes and military toys, and aisles called "Girls Toys" which are so pink they practically blind you, and are filled with little brooms and ovens. Where is the aisle for "Transgender toys"?

Rose is not the only one asking, "Would a boy wear that?" about clothing...I have heard parents at a cash register, where the father was upset that the mother chose a onesie without a football moniker or pirate on it...their newborn boy might look like a girl! From infancy onward, every aspect of a child's life in the U.S. is engendered. Small wonder, to me, that any smart and creative child wants to break out of these prisons and defy expectations. Still, I watch Rose grow up and I wonder who she will choose to be. And I cringe to be in a room where adults are laying out gender expectations for children with no thought that they are limiting and oppressive. This always happened to me as a feminist, now as Rose's mom, my sensitivity is incredibly heightened to how destructive it is.

I have always known how interconnected sexism, homophobia, and trans-phobia are, but when you see all three coming at a tiny being, especially when you love that tiny being more than life itself, it is a constant challenge to figure out what to ignore, what to verbalize, when to confront people who are diminishing her being, when to teach her to blend in and accommodate.

For instance, last Halloween, our neighborhood chipped in on a magician. Rose was dressed in a suit of cardboard armor she had labored hard to make. Most girls were fairy princesses or ugly witches; besides Rose, two boys were knights. The magician's behavior with the children had me furious, and I could only hope that Rose was not yet conscious of it—though I seriously doubt that. Each time he needed a volunteer, the magician would crack himself up by calling the girls boys, and the boys girls—and then propose that they marry each other...you get the picture. My child sat very still and never raised an eager hand to join him up front even for a moment.—did not engage in the show as the other children did. At the close of the show, when I tried to tell him how oppressive this behavior was, he rolled his eyes and showed no sign of listening. My neighbors looked at me affectionately but no one joined me in voicing discomfort.

Or: One winter day my four year old nephew came over to visit, and we decided to go to the park. He had not brought a warm enough coat, so I told him to choose one of Rose's. He reached behind all of her unisex parkas and vests and unearthed a pink shiny nylon jacket which neighbor girls gave to Rose and which, needless to say, she never chooses to wear. As he very happily zipped it up, rubbing its shininess with great pleasure, his mother emerged from the back of the house on the way out the door. She gasped in horror. "Take that off right now!" she snapped, and then snarled to me, "This is RIDICULOUS." The poor boy looked ashamed and bewildered as he was stripped of the coat of his choice and shoved into one of the many butchier options in the room. I wondered what this experience would teach him about girls and his own gender identity. My father, behind me, murmured, "She's afraid you'll turn her son into a lesbian!"

Anne and I went once to see the counselor cited in the parents' magazine for a session about 'gender variant girls.' She asked us a long list of questions, which it was a relief to discuss

with someone, such as, “Does she pee standing up, sitting down, or both?” Both, was our answer. She’s quite good at standing up, a skill she taught herself over a long period of time, but she’s usually happy enough to sit down. “Some kids get very rigid on that one,” the counselor told us.

After listening to us for close to an hour, she suggested some good, practical advice, which I pass along to you:

1. Open up language about different kinds of girls and different kinds of boys. We now use household language about ‘girly girls,’ ‘boy-y girls,’ ‘girly boys’ and boy-y’ boys. This gives kids some room to move around. If Rose is clear that she thinks ‘girly girls’ are boring; she also thinks ‘girly boys’ are boring! Neither wants to play knights or soldiers!
2. There are some books that have been written on the topic of parenting and gender identity...especially “Beyond Pink and Blue”
3. The counselor said that, with boys who love Barbies and lip-synching, there’s a good likelihood they’ll grow up to be gay. Much of the work with their parents is helping them make peace with that fact, and becoming their ally. She said the main thing parents need to do is to let their kids know that whoever they are is absolutely fine. She described the kind of problem-solving that parents can do with their kids to make the kids’ lives easier: for instance, one Mom carries her son’s Barbie doll in her purse until he can scout out the safety in a given room for him to claim it as his own.
4. The counselor encouraged us not to jump to conclusions about Rose’s gender identity, to give her plenty of space to wonder who she is without putting her into any kind of box about it. She thought it was completely appropriate that I had told Rose, at age four, that people could change their genders when they grew up. She thought it helpful to provide all kinds of role models and opportunities for Rose to talk to grownups with a variety of gender identities. But she said it was not yet helpful to presume that Rose would be transgender, though it is certainly a possibility. So many girls are tomboys, she kept stressing, who grow up to be so many kinds of women.
5. When I asked her if our being lesbians might confuse Rose about her gender identity (that secret fear that every parent holds that we make our children’s destinies) she immediately laughed. “We see some of the butchiest moms with little girly boys!” she replied. “And the most male-identified moms. And the same variety with the dads. Kids just are who they are!” In their groups, she said, there were no gay parents at all. (When I am not thinking like a crazy person, I know how true this is. Close friends of ours, both butch lesbians, have long since passed along to us some of the sports equipment and rugged outdoor wear they purchased at garage sales while their daughter was a baby. This is a child who dresses for the playground in a tutu, patent leather shoes, and a tiara. Kids are who they are!)

I have no doubt that Rose will continue to be who she is, and that my partner and I will do our best to make this possible for her. Still, as I write this, I wonder even how to use pronouns to describe such a complex, fluid, gender identity. Mostly I let Rose instruct me. I introduce her as ‘my child,’ not ‘my daughter.’ I follow her lead about how she describes herself. Right now, Anne and I are having our annual conversation about whether to let her have the crewcut she wants for summer. All in all, she helps me to see gender’s limitations, which look puny indeed next to her boundariless spirit!

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*The author, a UU minister, has changed all names to protect the privacy of her child. This is in no way done from a sense of shame or personal discomfort, but from a deep desire to allow her child the freedom to be without well-meaning strangers’ interference or expectations.*

# Transgender and Sexism

—Rev. Sean Parker Dennison

I've been watching this [listserv conversation about sexism] with interest. Having been on both sides of the "gender line," I do, of course, have a unique perspective on all of this. I normally wouldn't add my point of view because I think the conversation about sexism is too important to be co-opted or sidetracked by my relatively tiny perspective. However, when D asked, "The 'isms' are interrelated and also distinct, so what does it serve to ignore such a major segment of injustice?" I'm really interested in knowing where this fits into our UU reality today. It began to seem like I might add to the discussion rather than detract from it. I do so with some trepidation because *my experience* has been that the people who have the most difficulty with what I have to say are *often* the women whose feminism and activism I most admire. The issue of sexism and the issue of gender (and gender identity) are finely woven. Sometimes they seem tangled. But this might be an opportunity to work together to do some good.

My transition from female to male has only made me more aware of sexism. Now that I am male, I no longer have to imagine the privilege given to men in our society. I feel it, experience it, resist it, and capitulate to it every day. (I try not to capitulate, but for honesty's sake, I have to include it.) This is true in my day-to-day life and in my ministry. I can feel the added respect that is conferred upon me when people (in the search process, most recently) decide that I am a "real man." It's accidental and subconscious but not really very subtle. Once they put me in the category "man," things change. Because I am "out" about being transgendered, this may be about going from "other" to one of the "proper" categories, but I don't think so. I lived 30 years as a woman, and this is different. So my first point is: sexism is real, it's still active, and I see it every day.

My second point is a little more controversial. I often get questioned about whether my transition had to do with moving toward that privilege and/or "betraying" feminism and becoming one of the boys. Truthfully, this is the issue that I wrestled with most as I made my decision to transition. Why couldn't I just make "woman" big enough to include me? That would help break through the stereotypes, etc. which would be good for all women.

I wish I had an easy answer to that. What I know is that in order to live with integrity—to make my outside reflect the truth of my inside—I had to physically transition. To look like a woman, to be called "she", etc. felt like a lie. Not because I don't like women or femininity but because it wasn't me. However, I still don't believe the categories male/female and man/woman are absolute. How could they be when I crossed over? How could they be when I've been both?

This is important. I think it's a place where feminism and the nascent transgender movement can work together. If the categories are not absolute and gender is invented based on an oversimplification of a biological continuum, then there is even less basis for sexism. In other words, those of us who change genders or those who end up in the middle somewhere actually help prove that the premises upon which sexism are based are false. The isms are connected here in a big way! What I did when I transitioned was not an abandonment of feminism, but one radical enactment of it. Gender is not a category upon which we should (or can) judge people's worth. Not only because that kind of prejudice is wrong, but because gender itself is fluid, and the categories don't really exist.

So, the next question is: how can we work together to dismantle both the sexism and the transphobia that hurt us? How can my perspective help reopen the issue of sexism in the ministry and in society at large? How can my feminist friends be allies for me as I fight to be accepted as a fully human, healthy, and valuable minister? I think there are wonderful possibilities here!

# NATURE LOVES A CONTINUUM

—*Mary M. Boenke*  
(member, Roanoke U-U Church)

My husband and I have three wonderful children, who in turn have two just-right spouses and five bouncy grandchildren. It is our middle “child,” however, who has taught us the most. She came out to us after her freshman year of college as a lesbian and, 18 years later, as a transsexual. We were taken by surprise both times, but would not trade those two journeys, nor change our son, for all the world. One of the concepts we learned from our transgendered friends is a new perspective on our Western assumptions about the basic nature of our world.

It was Aristotle who crystallized a mode of thinking, that has become integral to Western civilization's way of seeing the universe. Called the Law of Identity, he said A is A; it cannot be non-A. Many of our doctoral theses and other research are stated all yes or no statements, statistically proven to be true, false or not proven. This kind of thinking has been a real boon to the development of science in many areas and thus, obviously, to our civilization, our whole culture and our quality of life.

However, another result of this kind of world view, and a language, which reflects this cultural paradigm, is that we tend to think in pairs of opposites; we see the world in dichotomies. A or not-A, Big/little, tall/short, rich/poor, mind or spirit/body, successful/unsuccessful, master/slave, good/evil, Christian/non-Christian, Black/white, gay/straight, and male/female, smart/stupid, and perhaps most significantly, right and wrong, just to name a few.

It is what we've come to identify as left-brain type thinking. It leads to focus, discipline, obedience, frequently to a simplified clarity – all pretty useful, way beyond science. This type of thinking has been with us since recorded history. It can even be a poetic world view. Consider the familiar passage from Ecclesiastes: There is a time reap and a time to sow, a time for war and a time for peace, etc.

My point is not that we could or even should do away with this type of thinking altogether, but to know WHEN we are doing this, and to stop and consider whether that is the best way to look at the topic, person or issue under consideration. We must realize it is a useful shorthand way of describing things, but it eclipses the full reality.

One of the dichotomies that has been the focus of our civilization for centuries is mind or spirit versus body. With our tendency to label things good or bad, the mind or spirit became the good side of humankind and the body was identified as bad, evil. Then we fit male and female into this paradigm and male became equated with good and spirit, while female became identified with bad and bodily functions. Day and night, Sun and moon, white and black, master/slave all fit the scheme of things. Up came a civilization where to be male was good, spiritual, enlightening, mindful, the master, and to be female became bad, carnal, dark and wicked, silly or mindless, for many centuries, almost a slave.

Time, which we measure in seconds, hours, years, even light years, is seamless; those measurements are our own arbitrary conventions. On another planet, a day would be altogether different. And Space, which we measure in inches, feet, miles – is likewise seamless.

In more modern times, General Semantics has identified Aristotle's Law of Identity, also, as the Law of the Excluded Middle. We have often lost sight of the beautiful variations of nature, much like having tunnel vision. It is the artists among us who have brought attention time and again to the nuances of color, or meaning, that many of us simply do not see.

Similarly, we have often denied ourselves opportunities and choices that we could not see. At the national Unitarian-Universalist General Assembly several years ago I attended a talk

because it was identified as the Starr King Presient's award-winning sermon. The title was "Interstitial Integrity." What in the world could that mean? Rev. Rita Nakshima Brock spoke eloquently about the stresses of growing up in this country of Japanese parents and the tug and pull to conform to the ways of her ancestors versus the pressures to adopt the ways of her new country. She felt for many years that she had to chose one or the other and neither felt quite right.

Finally, she said, she discovered that she had the right, perhaps even the moral imperative, to pick and chose what felt right to her from each culture, to package a unique identity, somewhere in the space between two cultures – hence, her own interstitial integrity.

By boxing ourselves into oversimplified opposites, we make it more difficult to deal with different points of view. This world view has a tendency to push our thinking even beyond dichotomies, on to extremes. When our views are exaggerated, it is more difficult to find a common ground with our enemies, or even those who differ with us on social issues – abortion or no abortion, Republican or Democrat, war or no war.

Finally, What is even worse, we have excluded PEOPLE from our view! For many years, we classified people as Black or White. If you were one-sixteenth Negro, you were BLACK. And Black folks could not marry white folks. There not only WAS no middle ground. Mulattos had no legal standing and, virtually, did not exist in the eyes of the law.

The Kinsey study, several decades ago, identified a scale between straight and gay, hetero- and homosexual - but then we, myself included, proceeded to forget about the large number of bisexuals in our midst. Perhaps even, in another, more permissive and accepting society, the two-humped orientation curve would actually become a bell-curve, with most of us falling somewhere in the middle.

Finally, we find that even the male/female dichotomy, the bedrock of our civilization, that most basic of all opposites, is subject to that slippery slope of gradations. I had come to that U-U general assembly with the recent knowledge that our beautiful longtime lesbian daughter, just come out a second time, as a transsexual and was about to become a man! As you may know, some people find they were born into the wrong body, that their inner reality does not match their outer form; to be consistent, whole, to be seen and acknowledged for who they really are, they must change that outer form. Others are born somewhere in the middle, with mixed chromosomes and/or genitalia. Typically they have been subjected to the arbitrary decisions of the medical profession, the pediatric surgeons, deciding for them that they MUST be one or the other, with tragic outcomes, which I will not elaborate here. Of course, almost every application blank, every public restroom, every drivers license, every marriage license, every legal document of any kind – all force one to chose EITHER male or female. It has been especially hard to learn to see those who do not fit even this dichotomy.

And make no mistake – not SEEING people for who they are is one of the cruelest punishments, a form of harsh violence. It is like the child who constantly raises his hand in class asking to be recognized and never is recognized: not in school, not in traditional churches, nor even at home. The suicide rate is very high.

What we are talking about is a shift needed in our deeply rooted cultural paradigm. Away from the old simplified, somewhat arbitrary way of looking at nature to a more fluid, open ended model that allows for the continuum. We, as Unitarian-Universalists, have a leg up on this one. We at least TALK about accepting everyone, and most of the time we do a pretty fair job of practicing what we preach. Let's all become more aware of the heavy price we pay when we deny ourselves and others that "interstitial integrity," the beauty and richness of nature's continua.

I am personally indebted to my transgender friends for making me aware of this cultural bias toward dichotomies. It has been a deeply personal "aha" experience for me. I see us all so much more closely connected. Not like separate entities caught on the web of existence by some external filament. Not even just as totally interdependent for sharing the earth and the elements

essential for our life. Yes, we all came from the stars, we are all made of the same basic stuff, the elements. But it is also that we are all defined along the same continua; we take our places next to each other, in very close proximity. We are more the same than we are different; or if you prefer, our differences are in degrees rather than in kind. I feel a new bond with all people, all living things, all the universe. Internalizing this continua concept has truly been a kind of religious experience for me.

# Story of Fire

—Rik Fire

it's all Spirit. it always has been. it always will be. there's been so many twists & turns on this long, hard, ecstatic road of self-identity. it's a path of discovery that will never end. and although i'm unsure of any final destination, i've made life-altering choices along the way and i keep plugging along because that's what Spirit calls me to do.

i try to stay in the Present. many times i fall short of that mark. i've delved deep into the past & the cob-webbed corners of my soul. sometimes there are answers. sometimes the ?s confound me & i get tangled in the web of self. my life, my identity, my experiences are the fragile, rich, complex, dichotomous, strong web i have woven & that the Ancestors have woven for & with me. i, the shape-shifting spider continue to weave myself.

ever-growing; ever-evolving; ever-changing. the part of the adventure specific to gender started to unfurl after i was rooted in both my Unitarian Universalist & my earth-based spirituality faiths simultaneously. a synchronistic unraveling of events occurred. i was named by my Cherokee Ancestors & acknowledged & embraced that i was a birthright two-spirit Cherokee on a shamanistic path. i called forth the intention to Manifest my Highest Vision led by Great Spirit & my Ancestors & began to strive for true balance in my innermost being. divine mentors, some uu, were strategically placed along the way for me to discover.

the vision questing process led me to pursue the process of gender reassignment and almost 2 1/2 years ago, i completed the process of transitioning from female identity to male identity: hormonally, surgically, and legally. my spirit is two-spirit & always will be, even as the outside package of ME is ever-changing.

i was an active lay leader in my congregation for about 5 years before i started to delve into this gender-related process of self-discovery. when i first joined my congregation, i presented as a feminine, straight/somewhat bisexual female. now, i am a man. i was a single-parent mama. now i'm the daddy of a 2nd grader & have been in a committed, live-in relationship with my girlfriend for the past year. i've had some support from individuals involved in our congregation's Interweave (Unitarian Universalists for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender concerns & heterosexual allies)chapter. for the most part, most congregational members have been silent on the issue of my transition—to me at least. a significant number of folks that had been involved with our interweave chapter, primarily lesbians, stopped participating in the group & stopped speaking to me altogether.

also, i am queer-identified & claiming that identity has appeared to have taken a substantial portion of our membership, particularly our lay leadership, to their breaking point of tolerance. while i have received support from my district glbt concerns board, of which i am a part, i have received no significant on-going support from my home congregation or its leadership for my queer identity. i have been ostracized & feel i have been forced into silence. i continue to be an active lay leader in my congregation & this issue has embedded itself into my heart & it pains me that my fellowship home is not truly welcoming, though the fuchsia welcoming congregation poster is prominently displayed in our social hall.

i continue on. there are bumps in the road. there is breath-taking scenery along the way. there are scars in my flesh & psyche & there is the glorious landscape of experience & awe within ME. i continue to weave the web with Great Spirit guiding me all the way. it's all Spirit. it always has been. it always will be.

# Transgender and Ordained

—Rev. Erin K. Swenson

On a sunny spring day in 1995 I made a phone call to Lloyd Greene, who was then chair of the Committee on Ministry (COM) for the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta (Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.). The COM was the point of contact between ordained clergy and the Presbytery, and so this call was important to me. I needed to change my name with the Presbytery so that my pension and insurance benefits would continue without undue complication. When I asked Dr. Greene how one went about the name change, he obliged, “Simply address a letter to the committee telling them what you need. By the way, what do you want to change your name to?” “Erin Katrina Swenson,” I replied, fully aware that this was a long way from the “Eric Karl Swenson” that was listed on the roll of Presbytery.

“Why do you want to change your name to *that*?” he replied, obviously confused.

I braced myself with a brief pause, “Because I am changing my gender expression, and this name will fit better with my new gender.”

Another awkward space in the conversation, then he replied, “I’ll have to get back to you.” The phone clicked dead almost simultaneously.

He did get back to me, not more than twenty minutes later. He requested the letter he had described, but he also asked for two additional questions to be addressed. One was to describe my process of gender transition. The other seemed ominous. He wanted to know what my intention was regarding my ordination. When I told him that I didn’t want to change anything about my ordination... that I only wanted to change my gender expression... he said that that was fine but that he wanted that in writing in the letter.

So I wrote the letter he requested. In it I told the committee that I wanted to change my name from “Eric” to “Erin” and that I was planning to have sex reassignment surgery in the not too distant future. I then repeated in writing that I planned to continue my work in pastoral counseling and marriage and family therapy, and that I was not requesting any change in my status as an ordained Presbyterian minister. While I had no illusion about the unusual nature of this request, I also had no idea exactly how unusual it was. It seemed to me that surely in the fifty or so years that people had been changing their gender (what we used to call sex change) someone in the clergy had undertaken such a change. I had no idea that I was entering a path that no one had yet succeeded in walking to its conclusion, at least within the stream of mainline Protestantism.

I received a letter not long after from the COM asking that I meet with them in person to discuss my request. And so I met with the committee on a Tuesday afternoon in April, 1995. They were very respectful of me and had clearly done some preliminary work. We talked about many things, from the history and development of my gender issue to psychology and theology. I left the meeting with a real sense that we had listened to each other and understood. This was borne out when the committee made its recommendation to Presbytery, a unanimous decision supporting my request to change my name and, although I had not requested it, to “sustain” my ordination. I was thrilled. However, one more hurdle remained. The committee’s report and recommendation would have to be adopted by the Presbytery as a whole. This came up on Saturday, June 27, 1995. At the suggestion of the Presbytery Executive, I decided to refrain from attending the meeting to avoid undue awkwardness. It was about 5:00 in the afternoon before I heard from one of my friends on the committee. He said that the Presbytery had not accepted the committee’s recommendation, but they had sent the issue back to committee for further study. The Presbytery was uncomfortable with the fact that apparently no church had ever approved of a minister who had undergone a gender change. They felt it needed further study.

I heard nothing for the remainder of that summer. One Friday in late August, however, I received a call from the Presbytery Executive asking for my fax number. He said that the committee had met and had assembled several questions. He would fax them right over to save time because the committee required that I submit written responses to all 52 questions by the following Wednesday at noon. That gave me barely five days to write answers to 52 difficult questions.

I chafed at the request. I even called a lawyer friend to ask if they could really require me to answer all these questions in just five days. “No,” he said, “They cannot require you to do that. That is unless you want to keep your ordination, in which case they can order you to do just about anything they want.” Not the answer I wanted to hear. So I cleared my counseling schedule through Wednesday, put in a supply of munchies, and set to work.

The questions were all over the map. Some wanted to know my life history while others asked for interpretations of particular biblical texts. One asked me to comment on a book by James Nelson that I had not read at the time. A few questions were remarkable in their hostility and ignorance of basic human sexuality. They wanted to know why I should not be required to go through the whole ordination process again as a woman since I had been ordained originally as a man. I quietly wondered what part of me they thought they had ordained.

One question, however, stood out. It was precisely worded in a legalistic style. I was later to learn that this was the substance of an ecclesiastical legal complaint that had been filed against me by one of my fellow Presbyters. I want to reproduce the question along with my answer here to give you a sense of the debate that stirred between us in the Fall of 1995.

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*How do you answer the charge that you are living a life of public deceit contrary to Holy Scripture and our Constitution?<sup>1</sup> — that your behaviors are deceitful and a denial of your creation? — that your behavior will bring shame on the Church and offend many of “the least of these?”*

I have “saved” this question for last because I think it deserves special attention. I am aware from other conversations that this is perhaps the substance of the Accusation that was filed against me by one of my Presbyterian brothers. I believe that it must be answered not only for him and the others joining him in the accusation, but for the church as a whole and for myself in particular. Hence I have made it the “wall” off of which I wish to make my theological statement.

I have struggled with the virulent anger that drips from these words and wondered the source from which such anger flows. As I have struggled with the other questions in this document, I have also found myself wondering why I feel like I am defending myself more from existential rage than from real theological argument. As I have wrestled with this, I came to recognize the anger, for it is not only the anger of my accusers, or of the Committee, or of the Church, but it is my anger as well. It’s as if this reality standing before you, a reality that clothes my own soul, threatens the very foundation of what we believe. I have spent the best years of my life wringing enough energy from myself to carry on as husband, father, and minister against a personal reality that seemed wholly unacceptable to not only others, but to myself and God as well. It seemed that I had either truly been excluded from the realm of heaven, or God was playing some kind of cosmic trick on me.

This couldn’t be true. So I spent enormous resources in trying to make it not so. I not only entered psychotherapy but also became a therapist myself. I have been in therapy so long I can

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to “our Constitution” means the official Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) which is composed of two parts, the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*.

honestly not really remember what life is like without a therapist to talk to regularly. I involved others in my personal struggle. I married believing that this had finally “answered” some need in me, and I was freed from my gender burden. Not so. I pursued what appeared to be a normal male-life pattern in the desperate hope that because of this no one would be able to see the terrible truth about me. I wanted to be female against all reason and against all that seemed right and good to me. And I lacked faith in my community, perhaps in my God, to be able to nurture and see me through whatever dark valley I seemed to be traveling.

So I carried on, burying myself in work, responsibility, and depression in order to hide from the terrible truth within. I applied myself especially hard to the task of living and working as a male, and succeeded. In my arrogance I even convinced myself that I could hold the terrible truth within me for a lifetime, dying with my secret still intact. But the depression and denial began to take their toll on my health and the health of my marriage. I lost my marriage, not because of my gender problem, but because of my willingness to deny the truth and therefore destroy my self-respect and the respect of my partner.

And so I stand before you bewildered. I am bewildered that I am being charged with deceit now when my experience is that I have, at great cost, ended my deceitful life and devoted myself to living in the light of the truth.

And so the central question for all of us to wonder over is, why does my proposal that the Presbytery accept my transgender expression cause so much visceral objection? Simply put, I believe this is so because the church’s struggle with me parallels the church’s struggle with itself. In a sense, the church has also been struggling with a gender change.

I must thank the committee member who posed the question regarding the sacredness of sex organs in the Old Testament, for this one question, above all others, has helped me to understand our struggle. You see, the OT view of male sex organs *was* that they were sacred in ways transcending all other aspects of human biology. The ancient Hebrews felt, understandably, that the source of future life was contained exclusively within this part of the male anatomy. The homunculus theory of human reproduction viewed the male seminal fluid (inaccurately thought to come from the testicles) as containing a small, microscopic in fact, human being; a homunculus. This homunculus was deposited, during the sex act, into the woman’s womb for safekeeping where it grew, nourished by the mother, to the size necessary for birth. Naturally, the source of all life would come to be revered.

And this ancient “scientific” view fit nicely into the strongly patriarchal culture that belonged to the Hebrews. Men, therefore, became the center of Hebrew social and religious life. Women were viewed as not only second class but actually of a different order altogether. This was common in ancient patriarchal cultures where women were often viewed as chattel, lives worthy of ownership and use by men. But movement away from the pagan patriarchal world had already begun. Both the Priestly and Yahwistic creation stories, that come to us through our Hebrew forebears and recorded in Genesis, say something radical for their time. Both stories, in different ways, place men and women next to each other, either by treating them together (“He created them male and female”) of making a clear biological connection between the bodies of men and the bodies of women (Adam’s rib).

God’s people continued to struggle with this, and the cultural and religious attitudes prevalent in Jesus’ time were once more confronted by God. Women, before seen only as valued property that could be cast out at the will of the owner, now were seen as human beings needful of respect. Jesus, in his discourses with the Pharisees about divorce, continued to drive this point home. And even more profound is Jesus’ friendship and valuing of women in his ministry. And in spite of Paul’s early teachings on family life, the early church clearly began to count women among her leadership.

Today, two millennia hence, we still struggle with patriarchy. In spite of ourselves, probably all of us continue to hold the status of men above the status of women. I experience this as mostly an unconscious thing, one that has been partially illuminated by my transitioning from having the social role of male to female. For about the first two months after I began living full time in the female role, I was having a problem bumping into people. At first I thought it was simply a kind of emotional dizziness that had come from allowing me full expression of myself for the first time in a long life. But as I went along, I began to notice that my collisions were almost exclusively with men. It took much self-analysis before I realized that men and women navigate differently in public space. Men tend to walk directly toward their destination, and women tend to walk toward the more circuitous route. I realized suddenly one day after another such collision, again with a man, that what happens is that men take precedence over women in public space. Even the men who would hold open doors for me or allow me to enter the elevator first would also walk right into me. I realized that men have the right of way! And having navigated most of my life as a man, I simply was navigating like a man in public while men were expecting me to navigate like a woman. Hence we collided!

My entire life has been filled with a struggle, often with God, about the difference between what I looked like, how I was treated by others, and what I felt like on the inside.

Now I am not so arrogant as to believe that God has somehow made me to be transgender to “teach the church a lesson,” but I do believe that God uses us somehow to work God’s purpose out. I would sing the lines to that hymn, popular in the seminary chapel, and completely miss that they could somehow apply not just to my theological education but also to the transgender nature I knew myself to contain.

I struggled my entire life with my own patriarchal feelings and attitudes. I felt it somehow shameful that I felt like a woman and wanted desperately to be one. I knew for certain that I would become a miserable outcast were I to reveal by terrible truth. And the portrayal by the media of others with my “affliction” did not help. These were not people with whom I could identify. I felt no relationship whatever with bizarre prostitutes and nude dancers.

But, you see, God has throughout history been calling people away from this ancient myth, that men and women are somehow of different substance and therefore profoundly different from each other. God has continued to lead us away from the prejudice and ignorance we all are victim to, toward the light of truth. The church, an institution characterized by strongly patriarchal viewpoints (in spite of it’s being the Bride of Christ), has entered a time when the church truly faces its own transgenderism. And my request that the church simply recognize my transgender reality comes at a time when we as the church are disoriented by our own (as the church) transgenderism. I don’t believe, incidentally, that the church is moving toward a matriarchy. As I have stated elsewhere, I have never really been a man, and I know that I can never really be a woman. I am transgender and will always remain so. My hope is that the church, too, will be able to recognize its transgender nature and discover more fully God’s love for us humans not because we are male or female (or anything in between) but simply because we are all God’s children.

So I deeply disagree with the charge that I am being deceitful and a source of shame for the people of God. On the contrary, I believe that the truth I live in is a truth the people of God are struggling to understand. The church, as it is currently, may not be able to recognize or appreciate this. Nevertheless, we are all desirous of finding God’s will, and it will be done.

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I faxed this along with about 50 more pages back to the COM just in time for them to read prior to their meeting. Strangely, I never heard anything back from them about my answers. In fact, it would be almost ten months before I would hear anything at all from the committee.

During this time I completed my real life experience<sup>2</sup> and had gone to Wisconsin where I had undergone surgical sex reassignment.

I realized I was in trouble when I received a letter from the COM in the summer of 1996 asking me to respond to their concern that I had pressed my gender transition at great cost to both my family and the church. My anger almost overwhelmed me as I realized that during all of this time not one member of the COM had contacted my family with any concern whatsoever about their well-being. Now they were, in my estimation, self-righteously accusing me of a lack of concern. The fact was that my gender transition had ended a decades-long struggle with severe depression, which had, in itself, cost my family dearly and ended my marriage. When I showed the letter from the COM to my ex-spouse, Sigrid, she became even more outraged than I had been over the COM's self-serving accusations. Within a week Sigrid and I had both written the COM confronting them with their misplaced concern for the well being of my family and assuring them that they were very wrong about my selfishness in pursuing a gender transition. Not long after, Sigrid's father, Hal, who himself was a Presbyterian minister (and former Dean of Students at a PCUS seminary) added his own input on this matter, supporting me in the strongest language possible. The committee seemed satisfied.

Perhaps the fire had been put out, but the ashes were still smoldering. I realized that the committee would soon be required to make a report to Presbytery, and knew in my heart that anything less than unanimous support from the COM would make a positive outcome at Presbytery all but impossible. It seemed that the COM was a very long way from its previous unanimous support.

I knew that I would only be willing to accept defeat if it came from an honest rejection from the COM and the Presbytery. A rejection based on ignorance and fear would be hard to swallow. I resolved to do everything I could to honestly and openly address the issues, and so I set about to meet with each member of the committee individually, giving each person a chance to air their concerns and fears about my continued service in the Presbyterian Church. It took several weeks and lots of lunch money, but it worked. When the COM made its report to Presbytery on the outcome of its study, the vote was unanimous<sup>3</sup>. The issue was docketed for the Stated Fall meeting, to be held on October 22, 1996.

And that day did come. I stood in front of the assembled Presbytery of Greater Atlanta as myself, dressed in a green jumper and medium heels. The committee described its process and made its report, recommending once more, as it had in 1995, that Presbytery record my name change and sustain my ordination as a minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. There was a period for questions from the Presbytery. Some of the questions were sincere attempts to understand, others were thinly veiled expressions of hostility. I remember praying silently for God's reassurance that all would be well no matter the outcome and praying for the assembled brothers and sisters.

The questions came to an end at a time that the Presbytery had previously agreed, and we moved to a vote. I remember the moderator asking for the ayes and nays, remember feeling overwhelmed at the energy behind the people who were opposed. Someone asked for a division, and the moderator then asked for those in favor to stand. I stood for myself but could not bear looking as the clerks counted the votes. Moments later it became official. In a vote of 186 in favor

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<sup>2</sup> The treatment of individuals seeking medical care for gender reassignment (or change) is governed by an organization called the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, or HBGDA. HBGDA is controversial among transgender folk, some of whom feel that access to medical treatment (particularly hormones and surgery) should be open to any adult who chooses gender treatment without professional "gatekeeping." One of the requirements set up in the HBGDA Standards of Care is for a year long real life experience where the individual seeking treatment is expected to live in the target gender identity 24/7.

<sup>3</sup> I believe that there were two abstentions in the voting.

to 161 opposed the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta voted to sustain my ordination. I became, as far as we know, the only mainstream Protestant minister to have undergone a gender change while in ordained office and retained ordination.

It has been almost six years since these events. During that time I became the Parish Associate at the Ormewood Park Presbyterian Church in southeast Atlanta, served on the COM myself, and been given the opportunity to lecture and teach about gender identity issues in many places. Some of my own understandings of what it means to be gendered have changed as I have traveled the country and become acquainted with others who have walked similar paths. The church seems quiet, for the time being, about the issue of gender identity. I have discovered that gender expression can change, and the way people think and feel about it can change as well. While much has changed, one thing has not – the profound wonder I have discovered in being a child of God.

# Person of Doubt

—Lorraine Donaldson

I lived about two blocks from a huge Baptist church when I was growing up. Several of my friends went to church and I was curious so I tried it. Put simply it left a bad taste in my mouth. The stories were neat, but I was too much for the woman that was left in charge of the kids. I had tons of questions. Unfortunately, what were to me innocent questions, were to her an attack upon “The Holy Faith.” The Bible was meant to be taken literally, not <gasp> questioned especially not by a snot nosed seven-year-old. Because I was there solely by my own choice, unlike most kids placed there by parental decree, I was free to leave. I did. To this day I find gospel music vaguely uncomfortable.

Growing up I was afraid of Christians. I found them particularly scary because in my studies of religion I had learned that Christians had burned witches, fought crusades, conducted inquisitions, and otherwise behaved very unpleasantly. The few Christians I knew did not inspire in me any great confidence that these tragedies would not be repeated. Hearing about how God created AIDS to “punish Gay people” pretty effectively negated hearing about the “Love of God”. I also found these people threatening on a personal level. I wasn’t gay, exactly. I wasn’t even interested in guys, but I wasn’t exactly a guy either.

I was a teenager when I realized that I wasn’t just a weird kid. I didn’t know the word then, but I was transgendered. I’d never wanted to be a guy, but it wasn’t that important until I hit puberty like a brick wall. I started changing into a man and I freaked. I was convinced that I’d never be able to be accepted if people knew. Heck, I imagined that my Christian neighbors would hunt me with torches and pitchforks if they knew. Given the statistics on murder in the transgendered community I’m still not convinced I was wrong about my neighbors. Fortunately I was soon old enough for college and was free to leave. I did.

Despite leaving home, I stayed deeply closeted about being transgendered. I did start talking with a therapist through the schools counseling department. We focused more on dealing with my anger issues than my gender issues, but at least I’d told someone however confidentially. It took me a lot of years to slowly but inevitably come out of the closet about my gender. I learned the word transgender and discovered that I could be the person I want to be. Over those years I tended to avoid religion although I’ve remained curious about it and read a lot about it.

Part of what made it difficult for me to accept myself as a transgendered person was my belief that I was male. Everything told me I was male. My body, my family, my first therapist, society, and I all agreed I was male. Unfortunately, we were all wrong. I tried to be a man until I was 30. I failed. I recognize now that there are more options than male and female and that neither gender entirely suits me. It took all those years of trying and failing to live as a male before I learned that.

Since coming out, I’ve met people for whom religion, even Christian religion, is not just a mask for prejudice and hate. I’ve started to explore a variety of belief systems. I’ve found groups for whom the fact that I’m transgendered is not an issue. Except it remains an issue for me. For example I have real problems with the concept of Deity as male or female. Likewise any religion that dictates different roles or behaviors based on gender is incomprehensible at best and offensive at worst.

I would probably be an atheist, but I find myself doubting the rationalism that says everything can be explained by science alone. I’ve had experiences that I can’t explain. One of the most recent is meeting my significant other. Put simply I made a wish. I asked the universe to put me in touch with someone who was a good match for me romantically. Through a series of what I

have trouble accepting as coincidences I found myself reading an article less than a day later which was written by someone eerily similar to me. I contacted Cynthia over the Internet and we are currently dating. Although I have trouble understanding how we managed to meet I'm glad we did.

Science provides a framework for understanding the universe. Religions also each provide their own framework for the same purpose. I find these "maps" of the universe fascinating. But my inner seven-year-old refuses to accept any map that doesn't match the territory of the world in which I live. In order to accept myself as transgendered I had to overcome the belief of everyone I knew, including myself, that I was really male. The price for this is that I've become unable to believe anything else that doesn't match my experiences. I simply can't accept anything on faith. I'm an agnostic. I'll probably always be a Person of Doubt. In my opinion it was worth it.

# Agnostic. and Gender Agnostic, Too

—Cynthia BrianKate

I've spent more time exploring my gender than my spirituality. Then again, they're similar; they're both non-typical, both might be seen as confusing by many and both are interesting. I've never really settled down to one definitive answer on either. I guess that makes me not just agnostic but gender agnostic.

Not only am I not sure if there's a God or Goddess, but I'm not sure what gender is. I've never seen anybody have any definitive evidence as to whether there's a God or Heaven, and I've also never seen anyone have any definitive proof or even any answers when I've asked them "what makes a man/what makes a woman?"

I have no idea what a man is, or what a woman is. I've never exactly felt myself to be either. I may be on what society considers "feminine side" but I know that's a made-up (pun intended) distinction people use. Why do people spend so much time and energy dividing everything into "guys' stuff" and "girls' stuff"? This brings me back to the questions I've been asking my whole life....what is a man, or a woman....?

I'd been asking these questions to myself since about age 4. My questioning began when I realized my family would think there was something "the matter" with me for being born with a penis wanting to play with pink stuff, and ever since I started being around other kids....and could just sense they knew themselves as being boys or girls. I think this knowledge might've come from having never had that feeling of being "born a boy" or "born a girl" myself, so I was able to spot it in others around me....or maybe it was just that they followed "the rules" and I didn't.

As I started being open about having a gender not 100% one or the other, I started asking friends and acquaintances these same questions...and never got any answers that made any sense. The problem is so many people take having one gender or the other as being as simple and given as the sky being blue....even the sky being blue isn't simple if you think about it. When I'd ask what they thought made a man or a woman, they'd respond with answers that made sense only if you had a "clear idea of what a man or a woman is".....so when I asked them to explain in terms that an alien to these concepts could understand, they couldn't.

Telling me a man has a penis didn't do the trick, as I know some really manly men who were born with vaginas, and besides, I have a penis and yet I'm not a man....telling me women have breasts didn't work as I myself grew a pair recently....saying women have vaginas didn't work for the same reason, as I know some amazing women with penises....saying women give birth didn't cover women I know who don't want kids, or who can't...

So I'm starting to think that everyone has a natural direction they're meant to be, and society makes arbitrary divisions as being "masculine/feminine" or "man/woman." Nobody seems to know what any of this means, but so many seem to think so. Instead of knocking myself out trying to establish "what each means" and where I may lie on whatever scale is used to measure these binaries, I've decided to just start enjoying however I'm meant to be. So I've developed philosophically even if I haven't had as much spiritual exploration.

When it comes to spirituality/faith, I'm even less sure. I'm still looking for a spiritual path that feels right. I'm still undecided, and I'm not even sure what I believe...or if I believe in anything.

I was raised Catholic...or at least baptized such.....my Catholic upbringing began and ended there and then, and as I was a few days old I don't think it made much impression on me. That's how it works with my father being not-quite-practicing Catholic and my mother being what might be considered anything from Existentialist to bleak atheist.. I've seen my father in church

only for weddings and funerals....as for my mother, her spirituality is best described as “you’re born, you live, you’re dead, you’re worm food” with no soul, God, Heaven or even reason for existence. So obviously I was never raised in any particular faith.

Though some aunts tried getting their hands on me, as well as laying their hands on me. Seems I’ve a few aunts in a sort of doomsday UFO cult arrived at by mixing bad science fiction with bad religion, where the “faithful” who believe without question will be beamed up by Spaceship God while “unbelievers” will be ripped up by bio-mechanical demons.

I’ve never had too much of a sense of faith. I don’t know to what extent this comes from maybe being a “born skeptic” (as I never even believed in Santa, let alone God) or to what extent this comes from not having a religious upbringing. I just know that one of my fears has always been that my mother is right and that when I die I’ll just cease to exist. Though another fear was the usual “going to Hell.”

I almost fell prey to my aunts for a while,. As they used my fears of Oblivion and Hell to try making me think that I had to follow their ideas or else...including on gender. Since they preached all the old stuff out of Leviticus and Deuteronomy I started worrying that my gender might be “wrong” or “sinful”....until I realized that their “Love thy neighbour” didn’t have as much room for gays, Jews or African-Americans. That made me realize this was not the path for me, as if the demand that I be a “Real man” or else risk Hell wasn’t a big enough clue. So it may not have been Exodus exactly (the official “ex-gay” church) but I may qualify as a “Dos Equi” (as in “Two Xes” as in “ex-ex-genderqueer”).

Since then I’ve figured out that not all people who believe in Jesus are messed up just because these aunts were. I actually like a lot of things I’ve read that Jesus is supposed to have said, and I’ve also figured out that he said nothing good or bad about gender or sexuality. I’m just still not sure if I’m sold on whether he did some of these miracles like resurrecting the dead, or whether he is the Son of God, or a philosopher or what. Though I definitely respect people who embrace him sincerely and see that it’s not about forcing “faith” or others. I’ve one friend who says she’ll “embrace Christ but won’t use the word ‘Christian’ because so many idiots do messed up stuff in his name.”

I kind of tried looking into Judaism for a little while. I’ve some friends who teach at a secular Judaic school, and they were among the first people to embrace me and my gender, so I became pretty close with them. I considered Judaism as another possibility....but it didn’t feel enough like me either, though I still celebrate Hanukkah with them occasionally.

I’m still not sure whether there’s a God or an afterlife, so I guess that still makes me agnostic, but lately I’m wanting to explore some of the Pagan paths I was starting to gravitate toward since I was a kid.

I’m not sure if have ever felt actual faith, but I’ve always felt drawn more in general direction of Goddess rather than God if there is one out there. And I’ve also felt some kind of special connection with the moon that I don’t understand let alone know how to explain in words. And lately I’ve had at least one thing happen to me that has made me wonder if there might be some actual power to what some call Magick.

I’ve found love recently, and depending on which of us you ask, a spell might have been involved. For years I’ve had major difficulties finding someone who’d go out with me, as most of the people I’d tried dating didn’t want to deal with the whole “ambiguous gender” angle. So I finally decided to write an essay, or a rant, about how hard it is to find love if you don’t identify along traditional gender lines and published it in Anything That Moves’ final issue. At the same time my significant other had met someone who seemed promising, but wasn’t interested in transgender people, and as she was at a Pagan campout, she “asked the Universe” to send her somebody who’d appreciate her and love her and be okay with her gender. Very soon after, guess what magazine ends up at her local gender group.....the one with my essay in it, along with my

contact info, which I'd included just to see if anyone agreed with my views. Instead, I ended up finding love, as we've been going out since. So she found me by "asking the Universe" and I'm starting to think that sending that essay out was the same thing.

Seems like out of all the spiritual paths out there, Paganism seems to be the one that I like the most from what I've seen so far, and it seems to have enough room for me as a genderqueer person. I'm still not sure if have real faith in a Goddess or afterlife, but I at least like the path, so I'm gonna check it out. So I guess I'm an "Agnostic Lunar Pagan."

# On My Faith

—Sara Davis Buechner

During the years of my gender transition, I returned to my childhood faith of Catholicism. It seems to many an ironic choice; obviously the Catholic Church does not have a good track record in areas of personal tolerance, and the results of its closed-door approach to sexuality are currently apparent to all who read the newspapers. Perhaps I am a “bad Catholic,” because my own embrace of this magnificent faith does not mean I endorse or agree with many of the church’s temporal policies and decisions. Like any organization, it has profound flaws. Rather, my coming home to the Catholic Church was my way of accepting the practice and teachings of Jesus Christ into my life, at a time when I needed to be sure of my direction. My mother, who left the church when I was a child, has joked that my reversion to Catholicism shocked her more than my sex change. Life-defining choices are usually challenging to others, be they matters of faith, principle, avocation, love, or any number of other important areas. Faith is a test, and it should be. God is not easy.

The moment of my gender decision remains in memory as the defining religious moment of my life. I was walking through Central Park on a sunny November afternoon, some six years ago, and lay down on a rock to look at the sky. Looking skyward has been a favorite activity since childhood, and when I can sense the fullness of earth below heavens above I feel myself as a part of the greater mystery embracing all. That day, I was exhausted. For thirty-six years of my life had been driven by inner unease, discomfort with the feminine interior and the masculine person I was known as. I needed resolution and found it that day, the day that God asked me if I wanted to “go there.”

“There,” I felt at the time, was the world of the feminine, and on that day I said “yes.” As the years have passed, I know that “there” referred to a far greater world – the world of truth, of beauty, of integrity. The world of simple grace and acceptance, the world of Jesus Christ and His Love.

In prayer and the Mass I found an ongoing place to center my spiritual life and thoughts. In my days as a man I cared deeply about prestige and career, and I was to many a “successful” person. When I became the woman I am, I lost much of this “success” and had to confront the ugly truth that most people do not present their honest faces in public, nor are they able to look beyond the outer physical reality of things. There are consequences to doing so, as Jesus discovered.

A large part of my lesson in transition was about houses and their foundations. When I built my house upon professional achievements, its foundation lay in financial and career gain. That house came tumbling down quickly when people doubted my ability as a transgendered woman to continue that life and work. But that was when I found a house with a real foundation, the house of Jesus and his Catholic Church. Here I found love and forgiveness and understanding. Here I found acceptance and a way of life which can never be withered away or destroyed, even by mortal death.

I am not a preacher and, the concept of religion being an extremely intimate one to me, feel a little strange writing about my faith for a journal. Like music, it is most deeply heard within, silently. Catholicism helped me to understand that my gender transition was not really a change at all; it was just part of my opening honestly to the inner self, to the true self, to my core as Jesus created me and wished me to be. For all the hardships I have endured in becoming a woman, I have no regrets. There is only joy that I could hear the truth within and live to experience God’s love. I am grateful.

# Transcending Physical Boundaries and Sick Religion: the story of a Transsexual Mystic.

—Ashley Moore

My name is Ashley Moore and what follows is as much a testimony about the growth of my faith as it is a statement of how I came to my transition as a transsexual being. Until just a few years ago my life felt like one endless story of shame and suffering. But in my darkest hour, I was able to confront my worst fears, face the truth of who I am and, in so doing, was finally able to bring all of myself to God. It was only then that I could finally heal.

I was the child of a violent, alcoholic father and a co-dependent mother who both grew up under repressive Christian doctrine. The product of two mixed marriages, I experienced racism from within and without my family. We were poor and spent half of my childhood on welfare. We were forced to move so often that by the time I was eighteen, I had lived in sixteen different places. I have been beaten, kicked, thrown, burned, choked, cut, shot at, and told daily that I was a flawed, useless mistake that would never amount to anything. The neglect at home was so bad that I once had a terrible fever, unconscious and delirious for nearly four days, and no one in my family called a doctor or even checked my temperature. I was so unhappy that I was only six years old the FIRST time I tried to commit suicide. Eventually, I became a runaway, homeless addict, a felon, a sexual user and a suicide risk that was finally abandoned and ostracized by my family. As a result of all this, I never felt like I belonged ANYWHERE, never had a sense of home or of community and never had any real friends until I was 15. I had come to believe that God was making me suffer because I WAS abhorrent. The reason? Ever since I was four years old, I felt that I was supposed to be a female.

When I was really young, I just believed that THAT was who I was, what I would grow up to be. By the time I was eight, I realized that something wasn't right as I was being told that I was a boy and had to behave certain ways. My father (who it turns out was struggling with his transgendered feelings), even tried to **beat** my femininity out of me. My classmates teased me and called me "sissy" and "faggot" no matter what school I attended. And while I was certain that what they were accusing me of (being attracted to males) was inaccurate, I had an increasing awareness that I was different. But with all the turmoil in my family life, the issue was obscured by other circumstances. So I would sit quietly in my grade school classes longing to be one of the girls and not understanding why I felt this way.

Then when I was nearly ten years old, my mother and I had a discussion that would change my life for 20 years. I was asking her why my father was so angry and why he had been institutionalized for a while. She told me that he was "very sick" and had been questioning his sexuality, and that he had sometimes dressed in women's clothing. She went on to say that she was going to use this information against him in their divorce because "that type of behavior is an abomination in God's eyes." Effectively, she communicated that feeling gender conflicted was wrong, offensive, a sickness and a sin that was worthy of public humiliation and abandonment by loved ones. That day I began twenty years of denial and a struggle to be loved by a God who I believed would not accept my flawed nature.

From that day on I tried to act more masculine. I spent months working on my walk, trying to adopt a tougher exterior, to be less emotive, more reserved in exchanges and more aggressive in sports. By the time I was in Jr. High school I was already well versed in hiding my pain and sadness: I was doing my best to fit in and not feel like a freak because of all that our little family

had been through, the upheaval and unsettledness. We were all trying to get on with our lives. Of course no one knew that I was growing more confused and afraid about the things I was feeling.

For a while, in ninth grade, I crossed the line and began to be ornery, even abusive. I found that I didn't like myself at all. (Today I can see how THAT path would have led me to be just like my father). And all along I kept thinking "maybe changing this or that will make me feel like a man and make these feelings stop." I tried not to long for lipstics, skirts and dolls, stopped sewing, cooking and making crafts. But the feelings continued and I would still find myself alone, dressed in my mother's dresses and makeup, trying on her rings.

My father's daily beratement of my value as a human being and constant reminders that I was a mistake only fueled this state of mind. By the time I was a senior in high school, I had come to believe that these feelings were proof positive that my father was right. I used to BEG God to make me stop feeling this way, to make me normal and not to forsake me. The effects of abandonment, violence and alcoholic-fueled co-dependent behavior of my family all served to reinforce this denial as well. Driving all this fear in me was the simple need to be loved and not rejected by my family.

By the time puberty began, I was already well into denial. I had always found females attractive and this became both affirming and confusing. I couldn't be gay, after all, if I liked girls. But I still wanted to BE a girl. Eventually I began to wonder, "how do I know I'm not gay?" All the guys in my school seemed so sure I was - maybe I was and didn't know it. So I experimented with boys as well, but it didn't feel right.

Meanwhile my relationships with females were distressing. The girls would treat me as one of their best friends, which was fantastic. But the moment something romantic or sexual would happen, the energy between us would shift and polarize and I would find them placing masculine role expectations on me that would make me run. And as my body began to change, I felt betrayed even by my body.

At some point I learned what a transvestite was – meaning a sexual deviant - and it made me nauseous! This was never a sexual thing with me. But there was no other information available to me that would describe what I felt. So where did all this leave me? A) I didn't feel like a male, felt like a girl, B) wasn't attracted to males, but females, C) didn't have a fetishistic involvement with women's clothes, but dressed like one on the rare occasion that I could and then would apologize to God and beg his forgiveness.

As a result, I was a teenager who was lost and out of control. I had an arrest record, ran away from home, sought solace in sex and all manner of illegal substances, parented a child by a girl who didn't love me, all the while filling books and tapes with my own songs about what I was going through. I was desperately depressed and struggling with gender issues.

Although my 12 years as a drummer provided a visceral outlet for my distress, it was only when I picked up the guitar and began writing songs at 13 that I began articulating my inner turmoil. And as my need to find solace in music grew, I discovered that the persona of a "musical artist" gave the people around me a way of accepting my "otherness". I could be sensitive, emotive, and even vulnerable. I could wear my hair long, wear brighter colored clothing and distance myself from the "jocular" pursuits of my male peers. So I began crafting another layer of false masculine identity in order to just be accepted.

Finally my need to be "normal", fit in and be loved informed most of my decisions. My eagerness to land in a stable and long-term relationship with a female at seventeen was a part of this. It was then that I met the woman who became my partner of 15 years and who was the daughter of 2 Unitarian ministers. To not have my sexuality questioned any longer was remarkable. To have the intimacy in which to grow and be supported was a dream come true. But all along I kept thinking "maybe this will make me feel like a man and make these feelings stop." I even thought that on my wedding day, "Perhaps it finally ends here".

None of this is to take away from her at all. I truly loved her and still do. But our relationship was doomed to fail because I was trying to hide myself within it. In the early nineties I was struggling to find a balance in the guise of a "sensitive" man and an artist. I had gotten into therapy, had addressed my issues with my family and began healing all those wounds. She was struggling with her expectations of me, wanting me to be both the loving and sensitive partner that I was, while still wishing I could be the archetypal "strong Knight" coming to take care of her. All the while my feminine feelings were growing.

The Unitarian church, and the Universalist ideology, had presented a new way of understanding spirituality. Since I believed I would never be good enough for Christ, I spent the next 10 years looking for a belief system where I could have a personal relationship with God. I studied the major religions as well as various mystical and indigenous practices. Still, I did not find a way to have the experience of the divine that I knew was possible. It took me many more years to realize that it was the belief that He could not love me that prevented me from having the intimacy I longed for.

Meanwhile, my early adulthood only served to make me more convinced of my damnation. At nineteen, both sets of my parents had disowned me. I was broke and living at the heart of one of the worst ghettos in the Bay Area, and after, inadvertently becoming mixed up with gangsters, had a price on my head. That same year, I watched Child Protective services tear the remainder of my family apart, which led in short order to my Father's suicide. In the years that followed, I became heavily involved in some radical political organizations focused on eliminating the sociopolitical inequities around race, class, and gender rampant in the capitalist cultures. You might say that I felt compelled to help others achieve justice over the inequities that resulted from the traits they happened to be born with. But this involvement lead to more heartache, harassment and death threats.

At this point I turned to my music full time. Music had been an outlet for me through all the traumas of my life. In it I found my only emotional comfort, a source of true joy and my sense of connection to the divine. In 1989, I wrote a poem that included the line: "I lose myself in you, my dearest music; the only constant of my life. My therapist, friend and lover who has never turned on me." I reasoned that if God had given me the talent to perform, compose and "capture" music, it would be through this anointing that I would find my way into His grace. The elements of mysticism, social justice and healing qualities of music were to coalesce in the life of Bob Marley, whose work began to profoundly influence my life.

The one advantage to relocating frequently was that I had been presented with many different opportunities to use my talents and was fortunate to perform with award winning vocal ensembles, drama departments, jazz and marching bands at statewide competitions. After I moved to Boston and put myself through music college, I toured the US playing guitar and singing in a 9-piece funk/R&B/world music group. Later, I became the production manager of a nightclub showcasing national acts. I was also staff engineer at several recording studios. Before long my name was on records all over the world and I was flying to New York & Los Angeles, shopping acts and negotiating record deals with some of the most powerful people in the music industry. I had my own studio business, a house, two cars, a dog, and a "successful" fifteen-year relationship. But in my heart, I was miserable. In 1993 my first "out" experience exploring my transgendered self had led to my being raped. This turned into a situation where I was blackmailed into maintaining contact with this individual which invariably led to further sexual abuse. This experience seemed to affirm my fear that such expressions of my feminine identity could only lead to evil.

In the mean time, I had gotten on the Internet. For a very short period in 1996, I began assuming a feminine persona and was surprised to find that there were other people who had these feelings too. In short order, I chatted with some of these people, learned the terms transgendered

and cross dresser and for the first time in my life I realized that the word transsexual had some relationship to myself. It scared me to death! It conjured up all my fears of abandonment and ostracism. I stopped going online and began the most intense period of denial in my life. But that information had caused a permanent fissure in my reality.

Whenever I stopped working, my brain would turn to these unanswered questions about gender identity. So finally I stopped having an emotional life at all; I began working non stop (16 hours a day, 7 days a week for over 2 years), stopped going home most nights and only found "peaceful" sleep by drinking myself to sleep. And every single day I wrestled with the idea of suicide. I never felt farther from God. In those years, I began to long to achieve success and wealth, for I had been deceived into thinking that I could use my talent to earn enough money that I could buy my way out of despair. I began looking for freedom in my golden calf. But God was about to make a way.

In the last months of 1997, I was working on a Gospel record with some clients at my studio. As the recordings progressed and these mighty singers sang their heartfelt praises, I again found myself longing to know God. By chance, one of these sessions was cancelled which allowed my wife and I had a rare, spontaneous date. We went to the UC Theater in Berkeley to see a film. On the way out to dinner afterward, I grabbed the listing of up coming movies for the theater. As we ate dinner, I scanned the listings. A movie titled "Let Me Die A Woman" caught my eye. The description said something about "a documentary following the lives of three transsexual women, which features rare footage of a sex change operation." Unbeknownst to anyone else, when the day came, I went to see that move.

In retrospect, it was the harshest, most inhumane and dreary portrayal of transsexuals I could have witnessed. Made in the seventies, the film featured three women talking about their life experiences, featured clinical explanations and presentations by their dispassionate doctor and had the worst production values I have EVER witnessed. The total affect was dismal. And yet, when I walked out of the theater I understood for the first time in my life "I AM a transsexual." I sat in my car for an hour and cried my eyes out. Suddenly everything made sense and I knew that my life would never be the same. I went home and prayed and said to God, "Lord, you know I have been fighting this my whole life and I have begged you for 20 years to make me stop feeling this way. But Lord, if this is the truth, if this is the way I am supposed to be, then I need you to show me the way. You will have to lead the way. I will trust in you to see me through." At last I faced the truth of who I have always been and was finally able to bring all of myself before God. That very day, for the first time in my life, I felt the Lord God comfort and lead me. And He has been leading me ever since.

Very quickly I realized that I needed to get into specialized therapy. I began researching the subject of trans-gender with every spare moment I had. To my relief, most of the first things I found were related to being a transgendered Christian - I was so thankful for the guidance and began to praise God from the depths of my being. Within 3 weeks I had begun therapy, told two close friends what was going on and began preparing myself to tell my wife.

She took it really well - we held each other and cried all night. "It all makes sense now, everything fits," she murmured. "We'll try to get through this together." And to her credit, she did try her best to be OK with it and make it work. But in her own ways, she was just as stuck as I was and her personal growth limited by the boundaries of our relationship. Finally, we realized that the best thing for both of us was to leave the marriage. We are still good friends.

But even before that, it wasn't long before things began to unravel for me, as things do for people who've been living a lie for so long. I had to deal with my denial and all the unhealthy choices I had made to get me there. As one writer puts it, "Sex is screwing. Everything else is gender." As I began to remember all the ways in which I had tried to masculinize myself out of fear and as I began to be aware of how gender roles inform everything we do, I began to have a

major identity crisis. I was peeling back the layers of my shell, back down to that ten-year-old kid standing with Mom in the hospital that day. I felt I had finally found my inner child only to discover she was a scared little girl and that I had to grow up all over again. I finally found that I HAD to start making changes and begin telling people.

In that same time, I read the Bible and found that God in Christ was very different from the **religion** I had been taught. When I learned that the word homosexual first appeared in the bible in 1946 and that the scriptures used against queers were mistranslated from the original texts, I began to realize that I had been given a distorted view of God. And once I saw that both the Hebrew and Christian texts affirmed Eunuchs, that universal third gender in it's many forms, I was freed from the prison that had been built out of other people's lies. Instead of feeling cursed, I began to feel blessed and became increasingly determined to spread these truths so that others will not suffer as I did.

As I transitioned, I found strength in Him even as I lost everything I had worked so hard to achieve - the wife, the house, the business etc. But even as it was coming down around me, I had hope for the first time in my life because I finally knew Christ and recognized that I too am wonderfully made in His image. I KNEW that His love for me was unconditional and that He would deliver me into His plan if only I would let Him.

More than three years have passed since then. I have made many changes in my life, my body and social role. Today, I live "full time" as a woman. I am now legally and socially known as "Ashley Moore". I have changed my gender through a series of reassignment procedures following the American Medical Association's guidelines and current protocol for the treatment of chronic gender identity dysphoria, and now live as a female. I have been on hormone therapy for almost two years and became a candidate for sex reassignment surgery in January of 2001

More than this, I am extremely happy. Since I found the courage to begin taking the steps to face my truth, my life has opened in so many wonderful ways. In that time I have found a joy and inner peace that I had never known before - the kind of peace I had almost given up hope of ever experiencing. My transition has been a journey into my faith in God, and I am deeply spiritual as a result.

They say that happiness is not a destination, but a road by which you travel. That you have to choose to be happy in your life. For me, accepting the truth about myself was the beginning of that choice. Giving my life to Jesus and surrendering to His will was the choice that set me free!

Just as my marriage ended and my Grandfather was dying from Leukemia, I was called into my first act of ministry. I helped him renew his faith, which allowed him to make his peace with the family, which in turn healed many wounds. That led to my first act of music ministry as I sang my Grandfather's favorite Hymn at his funeral: How Great Thou Art. That song later became a powerful vehicle that the Lord has used to confirm His will for me. And I began to have mystical revelations as He moved through my life. As I became active in the Transgendered community, I began to hear others talk about what they were going through and express how they felt abandoned by God, For the first time as I talked about my life, it helped others and helped them find their way to God. Suddenly I began to thank Him for all that I had happened in my life. I began to see how my suffering and my opportunities had been preparing me for ministry. As I began to ask for confirmation of this, I began to be led to places where I could find answers. I began to be called upon to share the word and the love of God. Which led me a year later to my wonderful church, the City of Refuge.

The Lord had been leading me strongly for a couple of weeks and it had built to a fever pitch in the days prior to going to my first service at Refuge. I'd had a profound series of conversations, revelations and messages so that I was in a deep praise the night before. At that service on October 2, 2000, every single thing that was spoken or sung seemed to affirm all that I had been experiencing. And I was overwhelmed, because I had not dared believe such a church

existed - an institution that reflected the God I had come to know. Yet here it was and I wept for sheer joy at the beauty of it. I felt like I had come home. Here was the spiritual community I had needed and searched for my whole life. It was one of the most powerful experiences I have ever had. In this church I have found the community I had never known. And I am so thankful for His mercy and His love that I still weep for joy at every service.

The Lord was guiding me to create a music ministry for the transgender community. With the encouragement of people at the City of Refuge, this became a choir. As it turns out, the Transcendence Gospel Choir, an all transgendered choir, is the first of its kind in the world. We sing praises and minister to trans people about God's unconditional love. And transgenders seem to be an acutely spiritual people. Perhaps this is because once you reach the point of saying that who you are transcends your physical form, then you are immediately aware of yourself as a spiritual being. Maybe this is why transgendered people throughout history have been closely associated with spiritual worship. Regardless, my goal is not to convert anyone to Christianity but rather to let those who have been driven from their faith know that God **does** love them for **who** they are not what they call themselves or what they choose to wear. Jesus said simply "**whosoever** believes in me shall have everlasting life."

All of this has allowed me to face the world honestly and as a complete human being. I have been blessed to have most of my friendships deepen, to know greater love and compassion in all of my personal relationships, and to find genuine devotion and support in my professional relationships. I now live with my lesbian partner in Alameda, California and work really hard to maintain a healthy union while enjoying life as much as we can. In the years ahead, I plan to move into ministry fulltime and thereby give all of my life to serving God.

### **Ashley's Credo:**

I believe that there is only one God.

I believe that God is devoid of all ego.

I believe that God is composed of many attributes, Such as love, compassion, forgiveness, faithfulness, and more.

I believe that God is a god of many names and answers to them all.

I believe that no one book could contain all there is to know about God or God's path.

I believe that there are many holy scriptures used to edify, build, empower and change lives so that they can become more like God.

I believe God to be all inclusive.

I believe that everything was created by God.

I believe that God is within all things.

I believe that God is the life force.

I believe that God is the sustainer of all life.

I believe that we are all one with God, earth, nature and all creation.

I believe that all life is sacred. Do no harm.

I believe that God is omni-gendered.

I believe that that all people were created in God's image and are aspects of that image.

I believe we all have the right to rituals and sacraments that will enhance our lives and expressions of God.

I believe in the importance of congregational worship and fellowship.

I believe that Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God and an example of the incarnated God in each individual.

I believe that Jesus Christ was the divine example of inclusiveness.

I believe that Jesus Christ was the divine example of unconditional love.

I believe that Jesus Christ's purpose was to teach us a way of life; to show us that faith lies between the individual and God, to remove the corruptible intermediary of institutionalized religion.

# Where am I going, God?

—K.T.

“I’m really, really angry at you God!”

Those were the words I wrote in my notebook while sitting at a rest stop off the Massachusetts Turnpike trying to make my way back to my parents in New Jersey. All around me were couples and families, happily on their way to some fun adventure together. My life seemed dead, no joy.

Just a month earlier, my close grandmother passed away. My dearest grandfather had died a year earlier. My partner and I had recently celebrated seven years together and now she had just broken up with me. The reason: both of us were going through the difficult task of who we were as transgendered individuals, both of us born as women but with the realization that was not who we were inside. No wonder I was so angry at God. This was not the journey I had signed up for... if I had indeed signed up for one.

I was thirty seven and suppose to know where my life was going. I was supposed to have a loving and supportive spouse or partner and maybe some kids. We should be on our way down the road on some happy adventure like everyone else I passed by that day.

It’s now been five months since I felt like turning my back on God and saying to hell with it all. God has been there with me all my life and now more than ever.

If I was like my sister and brother, I’d be married, accepted in this world, and not have to ask the deep questions I ask now. I would not understand what it is like to see myself in the mirror but not recognize the body or the face, because what my mind thinks I am is not the same. I wouldn’t know what it’s like to be given presents that are foreign to me like purses and pretty sweaters while my cousin next to me is opening gifts I want, a tool set, a nice warm flannel men’s shirt. He walks up to Grandma and thanks her wholeheartedly for the gifts he loves. I walk up to her and thank her because she cares so much about me, all the while hoping she will not notice that I never wear the sweater she gave me.

I don’t fit in this world as it is. I can’t decide if I should use the men’s or ladies room. My dad didn’t dance with me at my brother’s wedding or introduce me at my grandmother’s funeral. He is embarrassed by who I am. Why God? Why do I have to go through all this?

Although my partner and I are together again, taking each step of this journey one moment at a time, the only constant in my life, since the day I was born, is that God is with me every step of the way and in every decision I make, even when I yell at him and tell him I give up. I know that because he is around me, in those wondrous things I see in nature.

Last night I was driving down the highway, tears streaming down my face, once again begging God and my grandparents, are now there with him, to tell me what to do. I had so much fear and anger inside me because of yet another glitch in my life.

It was twilight, my most favorite time of the day. The moon was almost full and shining above in front of me. The watering of my eyes caused the moon’s glow to cast a beam of light down towards me. I tried to guess what God was telling me to do. I now realize it was God telling me he’s still here and when the time was right, I would know what to do. And I did!

I always knew I was different from most people, even back when I was six years old. Even then, I had this funny notion that I was really a little girl, even though my parents assured me that I was a boy. When I'd play with the other kids, I'd often take the girl's part in the role-playing. I was much more prone to crying than my father would have wished. Sometimes he'd ridicule me for my behavior, saying, "Well, maybe we should just put dresses on you, then, and you could be our *little girl*." His derisive tone told me that this was supposed to be a bad thing, but I always thought that it would be just fine, with me. Once I verbalized this to him, and it made him so furious, I never had the courage to do it, again.

My first experience with a Sunday School was with the University Unitarian church, which at that time was located in Seattle's University District, about 6 blocks from my home. Mom would attend the adult services upstairs, and leave me with the caring, supportive staff in the basement. Some of my kindergarten classmates were there, too. I loved the creative time, the drawing and painting, the stories, and the treats. I still carry the memory of a demonstration by two of the adults, how it is possible to tell if someone is smiling when they speak, even if you can't see them.

My parents were active outdoors enthusiasts, and my dad was always taking us away to go hunting, fishing, and camping. When I was very young, I was left with my grandmother on those weekends, but by the time I was 6 or so, I started to be taken along. Our calendar always included Opening Day of lowland lake fishing, Opening Day of deer season, and all the other hunting and fishing dates that avid sportsmen observe, the way some folks observe religious holidays.

I learned from my mother that the Unitarian church had taught her that God is everywhere, and that we don't have to be in a church on Sundays to worship, or experience communion with the Divine. I grew up with this notion, and as my sensibilities matured, I came to realize that being in a forest, or next to the ocean, or seeing the night sky, were ways of connecting with something larger, and more powerful than the Self. I don't know exactly when, but at one point, we stopped going to the Unitarian church, and the Sunday school, altogether.

In Junior and Senior High school, I discovered that the other boys tended to pick on me because of my slender build, my feminine behavior and sensibilities, and my obvious lack of physical development. Anybody that different has *got* to be *some* kind of queer. Often they referred to me as "a woman". Little did they know, they were right.

Many years later, as a freshman in college, I fell in with friends who enjoyed deep philosophical discussions, Eastern religion, political activism, alcohol, and psychedelic drugs. I read books by Herman Hesse, Alan Watts, and listened to discussions about and readings from the I Ching, Allan Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. I took an interest when my English literature classes required readings and discussions of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and H.D. Thoreau. I listened with interest as my friends discussed the readings they were doing in their Eastern Religion classes. I never read Carlos Castaneda til much later in life, but many of my friends were profoundly influenced by these folks, and it sort of rubbed off on me. This was a sort of Spiritual Seeker period in my life. It was not until many years later that I would I again attend a Unitarian Universalist church.

My undergrad years at the University marked a period of trying to ignore my inner sense of being female, and of dismissing those feelings as some sort of crazy obsession that might go away if I ignored them. I kept myself well-anaesthetized with every psychedelic drug then in fashion on weekends, not really looking at why. At times, I felt I had some profound spiritual awakenings and experiences. The ones that truly were awakenings, put me in touch with the inner feminine self that I was working so hard to keep locked up in the back recesses of my psyche.

These I found disturbing, and so I sought to ignore them, and redouble my efforts to “be a man.” The damage was done, though, as my mind was forever preoccupied with a sense that my trying to be a man was just a sham, and that anybody looking at me must know it. A bell once rung, cannot be un-rung. I haunted the open stacks and card catalogs of Suzzallo library looking for information about transsexualism, and transvestism. My searches yielded very meager results: the Reader’s Guide turned up magazine articles on Christine Jorgenson, and a book about transvestites entitled *A Year Among The Girls*. I still didn’t have answers, or a direction to go in.

I was not ready to accept myself as who I truly am. I found every excuse, and every futile tactic I could, to deny my essential nature. I was a member of a fraternity, and worked hard to be like the other men, to study them, to learn from them, to behave like them. It didn’t work, of course, and I always felt like a spy in their camp.

My learning history thus far in my life’s journey showed me that anybody who is different will be ridiculed, harassed, ostracized, and even assaulted. I sought to avoid these things, and so I pretended to be other than who I really am. I tried to laugh along with others at all the queer jokes, and when I joined conversations, pretended to agree with all the homophobic, anti-gay comments and jeers.

There were long periods of denial where I tried out being in love with a woman, marriage, and parenthood. I still felt alienated from my inner self, and alienated from society. My true spirit was still very much caged up, although I yearned to shake off that feeling of oppression. I shared with my wife that I had a need at times to dress up as a woman. I couldn’t explain, and didn’t understand, myself, why these brief interludes gave me a sense of release and freedom. She pretended to accept it, and gave me the space when I had the courage to ask for it, to express myself in this way. She was not supportive, and neither of us cared to have her see me dressed “en femme.” Once I was walking down the street toward home, and she drove past in our car, not even noticing me. This taught me lessons about mindset, and authenticity.

The layers of guilt drilled into me by society took their toll, though. Although for a short time I’d feel good while I was out and about expressing myself in the feminine gender, I always felt guilty and angry with myself for doing it afterward. It was always a letdown for me to have to “go back” to being a male—almost as if I were returning to a prison cell, in a spiritual sense.

The lack of acceptance by society in general of transgendered and transsexual people has led many I’ve talked with, and corresponded with, to keep this side of themselves hidden, as I tried to do. Most feel some kind of inner torment, guilt, shame, and fear, which prevents them from expressing who they really are. Some of us can break free from that, but it requires a determined effort, and emotional support. I don’t think anybody can do it alone. At least, I’ve never met anyone who has.

I tried to deny that being female was an essential part of my character, psyche, and spirit off and on during the first 50 years of my life. I look back and smile at the irony that my first real job out of college was at a residential treatment center for adolescent girls, in a houseparent role that had been traditionally held by women. Apparently the Executive Director saw something in me that I wasn’t yet ready to admit to myself. Whatever the case, I excelled in the position and advanced to the Child Care director’s job. I felt a certain freedom relating to the women staff, and the adolescent girls who were residents, without trying to put the sort of barriers up that men are expected to do in relating with others on an honest, emotional, straight-to-the-heart level. It was OK to be supportive and caring, however “unmanly” those behaviors might seem in the world beyond the campus grounds.

I brought my wife and ten year old son to a service at the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation in 1995. My wife did it to fulfill our agreement that we would both have input into the selection of a church in which to “raise” my youngest, and to give him “a moral upbringing.”

She had been raised a very strict fundamentalist Baptist, and her idea of proper religion was confined to what was printed between the covers of the King James Bible.

Neither she nor I had had much interest in “churching” our first two children. I had attempted to instill in them a sense of wonder at the power of nature around us, a reverence for the web of life, and a sense of fair play and honesty. I made all my various college texts and spiritual reading books available to them. I tried to show by example that living one’s life by the golden rule, and being accepting of diversity is a way that has worked for me.

We all seemed to be content with this *laissez-faire* approach to religious instruction until my middle son started to go out of control. He dropped out of school, fell in with bad companions, and made some bad choices, which included a case of burglary. As parents, we were both shocked, dismayed, and angry. Most of all, we questioned ourselves about what we could have done differently to prevent this. My wife decided it was because there wasn’t a strong spiritual upbringing to teach the children good morals. I disagreed, as we are very moral folks, and taught the kids all the right things. I allowed as how it couldn’t hurt to expose our youngest to what it’s like to go to church, though, even if this wouldn’t necessarily guarantee he somehow wouldn’t end up like his older brother. We agreed that we would audit some churches, and before choosing “the one”, we’d have to consent that this would be satisfactory to both of us.

Attending the OUUC that day is one of those watershed moments, I think. I was taken by the bright, cheery open space. I loved the sermon by Reverend Sandra Lee. The sense of caring and community was palpable. I liked the idea of drawing spiritual wisdom from all the major religions of the world, and the open demonstration in the belief in the fundamental worth and dignity of all people. At the end of the service, we all held hands for the reading, and final song. I felt emotionally stirred, spiritually free, and knew right away this was the church for us.

As we left the sanctuary, my wife said to me, “What kind of a church is this? Why aren’t these people carrying their Bibles?” She said it loudly, and I started to feel embarrassed. I asked her what did she think of the service? She said, again loudly, “There is no God here.”

It was clear to me that she just didn’t get it. All that spirit of community, which I’d felt so strongly, the wonderful words by Reverend Lee, the sense of communion with a universal spirit, were completely beyond her. I very much felt a sense of connection with a Greater Whole, and she saw a bunch of godless folk who didn’t carry Bibles.

I resolved then that I would attend this church, even if members of my family chose not to. After this outright rejection of the church I felt was “the right one,” I lost interest in having input into the selection process. Vetoing all the other choices didn’t seem like a productive way to attain our goal, and so I resolved to just let her choose the church, knowing she would end up with a fundamentalist sect anyhow.

It was at this point that I realized that all the other reasons for divorce that I had been keeping pushed aside over the past 27 years deserved to be looked at, and acted upon.

At midlife, we traditionally look back on our lives to analyze and critique our journey thus far, and then look ahead, again analytically, and think about how the rest of the journey should go. Perhaps this was the reason I began to take a look at how I have been living my life, and how I want to do it in the future.

Perhaps this incident at the OUUC tipped the balance by adding one last nugget to all of the various negative things I’d ignored over the past quarter-century of my marriage. Whatever the reason, I came to the realization that I had been ignoring, or sublimating, the fact that I need to live my life for myself, and that I am the one responsible for my own happiness.

If I had been wavering before, a large incident slammed the negative side of the balance down hard when I became the victim of a fraud and forgery perpetrated by my then-wife. I told her this meant divorce, and I took the necessary steps to initiate what in Washington State is known as a *pro se* dissolution.

Like dominoes falling, the divorce set other things into motion, in my life. I found I no longer had a reason to deny my true inner self. The journey of self-exploration I'd begun very timidly, and secretly using the resources of the World Wide Web suddenly seemed important, and I spent more time at it. I found a support group in the small chatroom inhabitants at a transgendered chat website, who directed me to some local resources, and supported each small step I made in the direction of self-realization.

I joined the Emerald City social club in Seattle consisting of crossdressers, transsexuals, and other gender variant folk, and found that I had much in common with some of them. They in turn directed me to the drop in groups at the Ingersoll Gender Center. It was through Ingersoll I got a referral to a qualified gender therapist. My support network was growing, and included people I'd met online and In Real Life, as well as members of the Emerald City and the Ingersoll drop-in groups.

I prepared the divorce petition, got my soon-to-be-ex to agree to it, and set that wheel in motion. I commenced therapy every two weeks in Seattle, and after 6 months was approved for beginning Hormone Replacement Therapy.

I found it liberating to spend time away from home as Julianne. I attended the weekly Blues jams in Olympia, and played my bass guitar at the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Alehouse and Eatery. The other blues musicians who were also regulars accepted me as Julianne, and I formed some good friendships, adding some of these musicians to my patchwork quilt of a support network.

My former spouse at last found a fundamentalist cult that was extreme enough for her, and commenced going to two Sunday services (morning and evening) and a Bible Study on Thursday. I took the opportunity on Sundays to dress feminine, and to go out to spend a liberating day as Julianne. At times, I'd attend the service at the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation, and always found a warm welcome, and supportive, accepting attitudes.

The divorce became final on 10/7/98. As a bonus, I was also able to have my name changed legally to Julianne Michelle as part of the final petition. Washington law provides that spouses can have their names changed at the same time as the divorce, but I wonder how many choose to have their given names, rather than their surnames, changed in this way.

I continued to live and work in my male persona and name, so set up my bank account in both my names, with John as an "a.k.a." to avoid difficulties with cashing paychecks made out in some guy's name. I also set up all my charge cards, the utilities, social security, and myriad other things in my new name.

On December 1, 1998 I made an appointment with my boss to discuss a personal matter with him. After work, closeted in the business office, I told him I planned to change my gender. He was, of course, surprised. This despite my pierced ears, long hair, smooth face, feminine demeanor, and the fact that I wore womens' jeans and tank tops to work.

On December 14, 1998, I got an early Christmas present of a severance check, and said goodbye to the position I'd held as an Automobile Technician for the past 12 years.

On December 15, 1998 I decided there was no earthly reason I needed to be presenting to the world as John anymore, and commenced living my life full time as Julianne.

When some of the members of the OUUC church decided to split away and set up a new Unitarian Universalist community in Lacey, I was invited to be part of it. Since many of the people I'd found to be supportive and friendly to me were involved in creating this new entity, I attended the meetings of this fledgling organization from the outset. We voted to call it All Souls Unitarian Universalist Community.

When I was destitute, the Board offered me a clerical position typing up the meeting notes, and doing other administrative chores for them, including preparing the monthly newsletter. I always got ready hugs, smiles, and kind words from everyone. I could see people living the UU principles in their daily lives. They respected the inherent worth and dignity of every person. They

showed Justice, Equity, and compassion in human relations. They modeled acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, as well as the other three basic Unitarian Universalist principles. I knew I had found a spiritual home, as well as a strong, supportive group of friends.

This really came home to me when I was invited to participate in the annual Unitarian Women's Association retreat. During the closing ceremony at this event, all 40 of the women circled and gave each other hugs, and included me in this. This kind of acceptance is so touching, I can't find adequate words to express it.

When the time came for me to have my Gender Reassignment Surgery, I was overwhelmed with the outpouring of help and support from the members of my little All Souls community, as well as the members of the affiliated GLBT group *Triangles*.

Kay took time off from her volunteer job to drive me to Portland, and to stay with me before surgery. The Triangles put together a fund to buy our hotel room the night before my check-in at the hospital. This fund also paid for a rental car for my return trip home again, after surgery.

Kathleen, Laurie, Barb, and Charmagne scheduled themselves to bring in my mail, and to feed my cats while I was away. Billie opened her home to me for a month, so that I could keep warm, have help if needed, and not have to risk straining myself doing household chores like chopping firewood or wrestling with propane bottles. While in the hospital, Maggie drove down from Olympia to visit, and gave me flowers. Jeanne and Gina visited me in the hospital, and brought me Jeanne's lovely old Gibson guitar to keep me from going mad for lack of a musical outlet. Eileen came down to Portland, gave me my mail, and drove me home in a rental Cadillac with soft cushy seats.

This support from my beloved UU community is one of the most precious memories I have. It also makes me determined to try to give back in kind to the community, however I might be able.

On June 9, I participated in the Pride Service as a sort of musical coordinator, which included arranging and practicing with Elayne and Julie to perform music for the service, and to write an original song and perform it, myself. At the conclusion of the service, the entire community surprised me with a Birthday Celebration for my recent surgery and metamorphosis. Many brought presents. All signed a card, and they gave me flowers. There was a cake with butterflies on it. What amazes me more than the fact that they did this for me, is that they were able to keep it a complete secret. I was so touched, that I wept. A visitor gave me her handkerchief, and shared a story about how she'd been given that handkerchief in a similar situation when she'd been installed as a deacon at her church. I hope I can pass it on, similarly.

This group has inspired me to do greater things. They have been very supportive and encouraging of me.

I was touched, and pleased to be an elected member of the Board of Trustees on June 30 at the annual members' meeting. I accepted without hesitation, seeing this would be an opportunity to serve, and "give back." I currently serve as the Board Secretary, responsible mainly for writing and distributing the notes of the Board meetings, but also for writing other things, like the recent anti-war resolution we voted on at the October 2 meeting.

Another example of the wonderful support I've received from this group, is that the Board agreed to move its monthly meeting from the 1<sup>st</sup> Thursday to the 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday, because I had recently started as a facilitator for the Gender Identity group at Stonewall Youth of Olympia, and these meetings were scheduled for the 1<sup>st</sup> Thursdays.

My life's journey as a transsexual, and as a UU, has been blessed many times over by wonderful, caring, supportive people who put into practice in their daily lives, the fundamental UU principles. They continue to be an inspiration to me.

# What Choice?

—Janet Flecher

Bored?

Want to have some fun?

Some real fun?

Then I have the perfect choice for you. I suggest that at the age of. . . say around 42. . . while living in the heart of the conservative Mid-west that you transition from male to female. It's fun. Take my word on this. . . I know. I did it. I made a choice.

But that choice is not what you think. There has been reams written on whether or not Transsexuality is a choice. I know, I have written and I have had published more than my fair share on this subject. I could write for hours on end about the scientific basis of Transsexuality, the physiological, psychological, biological, hormonal, suicidal, financial, relationships, sexual preference, etc., basis involved with changing from male to female. And more hours and more reams of paper about the choices involved with changing from female to male.

But that is not the choice that I am concerned with in this essay. Rather I want to look far deeper. Into a far more personal, more . . . I'm not sure what words to use.

About me, because in the end, this essay is about my personal choices and me. I am 50. Now female. I was born male in mid-western Pennsylvania. Grew up in a conservative Catholic home as the oldest of 9 children. I received an artistic based education in the Pennsylvania State College (now University) system. Returned (originally for a brief time I believed) home, found a wife, married, settled down. I eventually started an art-based business that I had for about 20 years, developed friendships and interests. So far, pretty normal, there are a lot of people just like I described in America's heartland. Then about 9 years ago I shocked everyone in my world when I started transition from Male to Female.

On a spiritual level, things were a bit different. While in college, I left the Catholic faith on the advice of a very wise priest. This gentleman recognized that experiences that I had fell outside of the dogma and teachings of the Catholic Church. These experiences, which I have long since became very comfortable with, were at the time extremely confusing and outside of any experiences or knowledge that I had had or been exposed to.

The problem was, I was talking to God. Talking not to Jesus, or a Saint, or the Virgin Mary (these options were OK at the time for Catholics I supposed) but directly to God. I was raised to understand that prayer was conversation with God. But this was different. This was dialogue. There were also the occurrences of what I believed at that time to be miracles (since then my definitions and understandings have changed). I was talking to God and he was responding. There was a voice in my head directing me, telling me what to do, offering advice, making things happen. I was struggling with GID (Gender Identity Disorder) at the time, but this was not about GID or Gender/Sexuality issues of any sort. This was about who and what I was on the spiritual level. About my relationship and responsibility to God, about my relationship and responsibility to family, and about my responsibility to me.

In 1970, conversations with God were not part of mainstream Catholicism. I am not sure that conversations with God in 1970 were part of any mainstream anything to be honest. However, that wonderful priest gave me insight to understand that there were people like me (he knew nothing about the GID, this was about the God stuff only) and that I should begin a search to find community where my experiences were both accepted and the normative.

Soon after I started my search I found the Quakers, the Religious Society of Friends. And soon I was borrowing, begging and even buying literature and books, and attending Meeting for

Worship. Spending endless hours in conversation with religious counselors brought me to the conclusion that I was a Quaker. That's how you become a Quaker, a Friend, you finally and simply become convinced that you are, indeed, a Quaker. I became a convinced Quaker in the months that followed.

I continued to actively practice being a Quaker during the balance of my college years and unto relatively recently, I have always considered myself a Friend, perhaps a distant Friend, but still a Quaker.

After college, I returned to my family's household. The choice I was given was pretty blunt. I could be a non-practicing Catholic, but I could not be a practicing anything else. So the Quakerism was placed on hold. Later, with marriage and career choices, attending any Church became very difficult. My partner/wife and I lived too far from the Quaker's to participate, and no other faiths were attractive to either of us.

About the age of 40, all hell literally broke loose. The GID, which has always been present, raised its very ugly head, I ended up suicidal depressed, sought help initially outside of therapy, then within a therapeutic framework, and to save my life, changed my sex. The cost was high, business, family, friends, career, and marriage. I paid the price paid by most transsexuals.

However something else happened. A chance meeting of two support groups I belonged to was held at a Quaker Meeting House. My then wife and I attended. On entering the Meeting House, I was overwhelmed and knew that I had returned home, to my spiritual home.

I also began to seriously think about what it means to be Quaker, which implies being a Mystic, and how my Transsexuality had to be viewed not only from a medical/physical/sexual/relationship basis, but what did my Transsexuality mean to me on a spiritual basis.

What I discovered, what was revealed to me, scared me and continues to scare me. I began to look at Transsexuality from a different viewpoint, one that there were very few guideposts. I began to see Transsexuality not as a curse, a disease, but as a gift, a gift from God.

I'll admit. Being born TS is not a gift I would want to wish on anyone. I often tell hardcore Christian Fundamentalists that I have no fear of eternity in hell, having lived on earth as a Transsexual.

I began to ask a more basic question, why? Why me? Why Transsexuality? Why did this God who I so often in my life talk with, who had such a strong presence for so many years chose for me to be born Transsexual? What was the meaning of this choice on the part of God? Since I believe in a God that not only takes an interest in me and my life, and had been at that time an active participant in my life for 20 odd years, why did he want me TS? I knew that it was not my choice (remember, this is an essay about choice, right?). So if it was not my choice, who's was it? I had definitely become convinced that it was a choice. Someone had made the choice that of all the afflictions I could have been made to suffer; I was selected to suffer GID. Who?

My conclusion was God made this choice. The next equally important question was why? Why Transsexuality and why me? These were harder questions. Some of the answers I considered included:

"God was bored". OK, this is a good one, you see, God gets bored sitting on his royal throne so he gives us "challenges" to make us struggle so that he can watch us in amusement. OK, thin, but I thought of it! Didn't fit the God I knew.

Then there was "God wanted me to suffer so he made me a Transsexual". This is actually fairly common in the TS community. Many come to believe that Transsexuality is literally hell on Earth, punishment for some sin committed by their fathers or their selves in some past life. But this did not work for me. For me, God has always been a source of solutions, not of pain.

Then there was "God simply does not care." This is the random God approach to the problem. Kind of like a combination of bingo and the Lotto. The God of Vegas. I can remember

the theme to Candid Camera running through my mind endlessly. . . “When you least expect it, your selected, you’re the Star today. . . “ This never really worked either.

And finally, “God needs me to be a Transsexual”. This answer felt from the beginning to be most true, most real. One of the concepts that you develop after 20-30 years living as a Mystic is that God’s gifts are not evenly distributed. Quaker’s have a saying. “From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” This is a reflection that every individual is unique and as such, has a unique set of gifts given to him/her by their creator, by God. This set of gifts includes the ability to know the presence of God within and the ability to communicate directly with that presence.

But why would God need me to be a Transsexual? Why would God need me to suffer? Why to go through living a life that I openly have described as “Hell on Earth”?

The answer came to me from experience. From living my life. One truth that I have learned from 40-50 years of living is that when it comes to growth, no pain, no gain. This is for any growth (except weight gain, that seems to defy God’s purpose for the world). You want the growth, you do the work, and you pay the price. I was paying the price, but why? Why was I asked to pay this price?

In her book, *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong quotes the Sacred Tradition of the Sufi’s “When I love him, I become his Ear through which he hears, his Eye with which he sees, his Hand with which he grasps, and his Foot with which he walks.” When I recently read this Tradition I felt an affinity to the people who wrote and believed this Tradition over one thousand years ago. In answering the question of “Why me?” I had come to a very similar understanding of my relationship with God. I have come to understand that I am the eyes, by which he sees, the ears, by which he hears, I am his voice by which he speaks, the hands, by which he does. I both a witness for God, and I am a tool for God. I came to understand that all humans are tools of Gods, both tools of witness and tools of action.

For me, for my relationship with God, it is important to understand that I both receive and I give. I not only take from God, but I give to God. As I ask of God, God too asks of me.

And in his asking of me, God has asked me to change. He asked me to change from Catholic to Quaker (and then much more recently from Quaker to Unitarian). And he asked me to change from male to female. Did I have a choice? This is an essay about choice after all. . . Yes I did have a choice. But not necessarily the choice many believe that I had. It was not a choice of accepting his asking. God simply asks, as we ask of God. We have no choice in what God asks of us. Rather it was a choice of understanding. Understanding why I was being asked. Why me? Why Transsexuality? Me because God choose me. Transsexuality because God chose Transsexuality. And since this is not the God of Vegas, not a random drawing of random numbers, but a deliberate choice, then why?

The answer lies within my belief that I am God’s voice and his hands. I am a tool of God. And as every carpenter knows, tools need to be forged, to be made, to be sharpened. The better a tool is forged, the sharper it can become, and the more effective the tool then is. I am God’s voice and his hands. I am his tool.

I am also God’s eyes and his ears. With my eyes and my ears I witness for God. I cannot choose what I witness. I can choose to be blind and not to acknowledge, but truthfully, what I see and what I hear is often not a choice that I have. Example, when I am discriminated against, I have no choice in the discrimination. It is happening to me. I witness the discrimination for God.

Transsexuality was the forge, which God has chosen to use to forge this tool, to sharpen this tool into effective voice and hands. It was also the forge by which my eyes and ears for forged into tools of witness. I personally cannot choose not to witness. Being a witness for God is not something we can often choose to do or not to do. Ask anyone born blind, or mentally handicapped, or black, or gay. We witness for God that which he created in us. By our gifts. Being

a witness is not about how the witness uses the gifts, but how the rest of God's creations react to and how they treat those with God's gifts. We witness for God the acts of others. That is why we are God's eyes and his ears. It is through our eyes that the evidence that God collects is collected. It is not for us to judge, but to experience that upon which judgment will be made.

Many of us cannot choose to be or not to be a witness for God much of the time. We can choose how evident we make those gifts which makes us a witness some of the time. And we can choose to follow paths revealed to us by God, which will make us into God's witness. But for many of us, there simply is no choice. We simply are God's witness.

A simple example. Ask five blind from birth men to play basketball against five professional basketball players. The five blind men cannot choose not to be blind, but they can choose to attempt to play, or not to attempt to play a basketball game. In the asking, the five blind men are asked to give witness. They can choose to continue that witness or not. In the asking alone there is cause for witness.

But what about his hands? What about God's voice? Are these our choices? God makes us into the tools he needs. We are shaped in the fires of experience and life into the tools that God needs to do his work. I was shaped by the forge of my experiences. Sharpened for a task I did not ask for, did not want, do not want. But nonetheless it is God's will that I have been shaped.

My choice, because at last I do have a choice, is whether or not I will choose to be God's tool. His voice, his hands. My choice is whether or not I open myself to God's asking. Do I accept his calling. Do I do his work? Speak his words? Give his Ministry? Teach the lessons that he has crafted within me the skills and knowledge to teach?

I did not choose to be a Transsexual, I was born one, thus I cannot choose whether or not to be a witness. I did not choose to become a Mystic, God simply started talking to me. I did not choose to change my sex; I chose to do anything I could to stay alive which included changing my sex. I did not choose to suffer as a result of my decision to remain alive.

I did chose to acknowledge God in my daily life. I did choose to understand why God chose me. I do continue to choose to allow myself to be fully used both as a witness and as a tool by God.

And finally, I did choose to write this essay.

That was my choice.

Or was it God's?

# Gender Change in the Real World of Work

—Marsha Botzer

I made my gender transition toward the end of 17 years in Local 32, Plumbers and Pipefitters. I did not leave because of poor treatment. Rather, there was support - perplexed support, but honest help nevertheless. And this was in 1981, when few in the labor movement knew about Transgendered workers. So, I was very lucky.

And still, today, lots of people don't understand even the basics, so here it is very briefly. Transgendered people feel their bodies do not match their sense of self, and they go through a process to make their bodies match their identities. As I did, they change their bodies. We do it with hormones, appearance, mannerisms, clothes and sometimes, but NOT always, with surgery. We do it because the "I" inside us is as strong as anyone else's: it just doesn't match our bodies. Lots of research has shown what we transgendered people know, that this "gender identity" is established by the time we're two or three years old, and it's stubbornly resistant to change. Therapy, religion, jail, hospitals – none have been successful, and they've all been used against us.

The Transgender condition isn't sick, it isn't crazy, it isn't evil or wrong, it just is. Today, there is an accepted medical and psychological treatment process that a person can go through; it takes a long time, requires a lot of work, plus a lot of cash. The end result, feeling whole, is worth it. But no one would take on this transition lightly.

Of course, we change genders in the real world, and this means we change at work. Just like everyone else, we have to keep working to pay for what we do. Because of harassment and ignorance, Transgender workers often need Labor's support to get through this time. The point is to help a fellow worker keep going without intimidation or discrimination. The same things anyone needs in the workplace. A union contract with gender identity and expression in it, a steward who isn't afraid to fight, a community of supporters – these things can mean the difference between life and death.

Our media tell us all will be fine if we don't trouble ourselves about the next person, or join together, or fight for each worker's rights - and especially if we just get out there and buy something. Who stands against this view? Labor, in its historical role as protector of all working people. I believe that ultimately, people who divide fail, and those who unite for equality shower the world with joy. Transgender workers are one more set of willing hands, ready to fight for equality and for the triumph of human beings over the ravages of greed. The time for equality is now.

*Marsha Botzer is an OFLC/Seattle PAW member as well as a board member of the NGLTF.*

# God's A God Of Love And Not A God Of Hate

*—Joni Christian*

There is a God above who watches over us.  
A God of love who created you.  
You are unique, though maybe not complete -  
Yet you belong to Him.

[Chorus]

Yes, you are god's, thought of from the start  
You're a very special part of the universe.  
Created not for harm, but to be cradled in his arms  
For god's a god of love and not a god of hate.

There are angels up above, created with pure love.  
These angels are watching over you.  
Protection, strength and hope they give us every day  
Just claim their mighty powers today!

Remember—

[Chorus]

Yes, you are god's, thought of from the start  
You're a very special part of the universe.  
Created not for harm, but to be cradled in his arms  
For god's a god of love and not a god of hate.

Equal all are we, given freedom to be  
Individual expressions of God's love ...  
Know that we can be one world in harmony.  
For this is the vision of our God!

[Chorus]

Oh, yes be sure to see to see the winds that churn the seas -  
The seas of healing waters that make us all free -  
Free to be one world in harmony.  
For this is the vision,  
Oh, this is the vision,  
Yes, this is the vision of our God!

# A Transfigured Name

—Cameron Partridge

*Almighty God, to whom our needs are known before we ask: Help us to ask only what accords with your will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, grant us for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

“God, let me be transfigured” I had prayed all during the season of Epiphany.<sup>2</sup> “Let me be figured as trans, transformed as you would have me formed, created anew in your image as I believe we all are re-created every day—whatever this will mean, wherever this will take me. Amen.”

All of that year, as I drove between Boston and New Haven for a final year of divinity school, I had been struggling to imagine how I wanted to embody my gender. I had been uncomfortable being seen as female for as long as I could remember, and my consciousness of that discomfort had grown increasingly acute over my college and graduate school years. I knew I wanted to change my way of being in the world, including my body, but how exactly? I couldn’t quite grasp where I was headed. I also had a feeling my vision would clear when I had enough courage to see. What would I look like? What *could* I look like? What would my *life* then look like? My imagination had hit a block that I was trying to pray my way through.

Several times a week strange experiences would hold a mirror up to the queerness of my gender. During my first month at a New Haven divinity school I had come out of a stall in the women’s restroom and was washing my hands. As I stood there at the sink I heard the bathroom door open and remain open. I could sense someone staring at me. This had happened enough times in various places that I knew what was going on—the woman in the doorway thought I was in the wrong restroom. Figuring out how to respond to such declarations had become quite a challenge. I wasn’t one to say something like “Hello?! I’m a woman—I belong here!” because I didn’t feel that I truly was a woman, and on some level I didn’t feel I actually belonged there. At that point the men’s room didn’t exactly beckon to me either; it scared the bejesus out of me. Earlier that fall I had stopped to use the bathroom at a rest stop and as I was walking into the women’s room a man started calling out to me. When I realized he was talking to me I paused and turned around in the bathroom doorway. The scruffy guy was six inches away from my face and looked acutely embarrassed. In a stage whisper he said, “uh, yer about to go into the *ladies room*!” I wondered what to say. Then I responded, “I know.” He stared at my face, then at my chest, and sputtered, “Oh! Sorry!” If I didn’t know for sure that a unisex bathroom would be in my immediate vicinity, one of my partner’s family phrases – “pee now or forever hold your pee”—was the watchword

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979) 394-395.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Transfiguration’ refers to the story of Jesus’s glowing appearance in the company of Moses and Elijah on top of a mountain. This story appears in Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36, and Matthew 17:1-8 and is referred to in 2 Peter 1:16-18. In many Protestant denominations including the Episcopal Church, to which I belong, the end of the liturgical season called “Epiphany” (which follows the seasons of Advent and Christmas and precedes Lent and Easter) ends with a Sunday known as “Transfiguration Sunday.” Liturgically—in the worship practice of Episcopalians – transfiguration therefore marks the threshold between Epiphany and Lent, just as a feature of the gospel story is that just after this revelation of Jesus on the mountain, he tells his disciples he is going to die. There is also a Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6<sup>th</sup> which originated in the Eastern Christian tradition. Transfiguration thus also marks the threshold between Jesus’ life and death, and suggests that his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are all of a piece. Transfiguration marks a narrative space where time is congealed, in a sense, events of earlier and later moments come together and cross over—*trans* means ‘across’ in Latin—normal chronological and spatial boundaries. Transfiguration Sunday is, needless to say, one of my favorite days in the church year! *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1957, 1997) 1636-1637.

before leaving home. So finally, back in New Haven, I turned to the confused woman in the bathroom doorway. “Are you okay?!” I asked. “Uh...Uh...” She looked at me, then at a stall door, me, stall door, and muttered, “I thought you... I thought this was...Uh...” And then she just went into a stall.

One experience in particular had perfectly illustrated my peculiar reality. Kateri and I had gone to a hip Boston synagogue to observe a friend in action as a newly ordained rabbi. We were seated alone in a pew listening to her when an elderly gentleman made his way down our row. He was holding a kippa, a small round head covering usually worn by men in synagogues, and he was scowling at me. I was seated closest to him, and suddenly felt distinctly uncomfortable. When he reached my side he thrust the kippa toward me. Realizing what was going on and wanting above all else to be respectful, I reached for it. But then suddenly, before I could grasp it, he snatched it back. I was confused. He was staring at me. Then he held it out again. I reached for it. He snatched it back. When he extended it again I was able to take it from him and put it on my head. It wouldn’t stay put. At this point the poor baffled gentleman turned and made his way out of the pew, and I turned to Kateri who was trying very hard not to crack up.

On the one hand, I considered—and still embrace – my liminal gender as a gift. I believe its pervasive influence in my life can open my eyes to what William Countryman has called “border country”—the spaces and times where we can perceive the Presence of the divine in the created realm<sup>3</sup> – more clearly than I might be able to otherwise. On the other hand, it’s also always felt like unfinished business. While certain strange public encounters were emblematic of my gender liminality, they were few and far between compared to the interactions that unambiguously gendered me as female.<sup>4</sup> If gender is viewed in the United States as a kind of seesaw, we all tend to get plunked down on one side or the other. I felt myself to be more in the middle, though definitely leaning toward the masculine side of what some gender theorists and even some scientists are articulating as a continuum. Yet, paradoxically, my masculine leaning wasn’t often being recognized through people “plunking” me into the “man” box; I was continuously pushed into the one category to which I felt keenly that I didn’t belong, the “woman” box. Yes, I believe strongly that women can be whoever they want to be, and that women should be able to express their gender in whatever way they desire. Ultimately, to me, freedom of gender expression is an ethical mandate. That includes women being free to be as masculine as they want to be and men likewise being as feminine as they desire. But it also includes the—for the most part concretely unrecognized – reality that there are more than two genders. In the everyday world in which I live, move, and have my being, however, a different reality is most often enacted. In all sorts of mundane ways, I was getting corralled in a box that was increasingly feeling like a cage. I felt like my internal reality was completely invisible to most people I encountered in the world, that this gender enactment was becoming an unbearable stumbling block. I needed to find a way to transform my gender, that for me it might become a cornerstone.

That fall in New Haven, while reading for a course on Anglican Theology, I had stumbled across a quote from the first Letter of John. It pierced to the heart of my quandary: “See what love

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<sup>3</sup> L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999) 8.

<sup>4</sup> I view gender primarily as a process rather than a static, reality. I see it as a combination of biological and cultural influences, of ongoing processes hormonal and relational, but I don’t think it’s at all clear just how distinct the cultural and biological influences truly are or how and whether one source or the other “predominates.” In terms of the way I understand us all to be “gendered” on an ongoing basis, I’m deeply influenced by the writings of Judith Butler, including her insistence that we can’t simply will ourselves out of the larger cultural system of gender bifurcation. I don’t believe we completely lack agency in our own gendering, but likewise I don’t think we’re entirely “in control” either. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, (New York, London: Routledge, 1993).

the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."<sup>5</sup> I had been lying on my bed trying to keep my eyes open when this passage jumped out at me. It was as though God was speaking to my queries, through the written witness of an ancient community: *you are one of God's children now, you're not alone, yes the world around you doesn't know you. The more it gets to know God the more it will be able to recognize you and others like you. Yes, you're worried about where you're headed, what you will even look like, but it isn't time for that just yet. What we will be has not yet been revealed. And then the final verse echoed in my heart, What we do know is this: when God is revealed, we will be like God, for we will see God as God truly is.* Lying there on my bed, I knew that the author of this text technically was speaking about the end of days. But to translate its message into my own life there and then, I had the sense that the more I could open myself to God's abiding presence, the more my heart could actively perceive God working in my life, the more *what we will be* could be realized in my life, as a foretaste of what we all finally will be in the heart of the divine. It was this message that led me to pray later that winter, "God, let me be transfigured."

The summer that followed that prayer was full of angst as my partner and I prepared to negotiate a long distance relationship. Kateri was headed to California for a post-doctoral fellowship while I was to begin my doctorate in Boston. In the midst of this pain, the question of how I was to be figured as trans increased in urgency.

That autumn I went about my life with the strange sensation that I was falling. I felt it as I walked through the park on my way to class, watching the yellow leaves flittering and swaying to the ground. When would this leaf finally land? How did I personally need to embody this identity? How might I want to change my body? How might I want to intervene in the ongoing social process through which I could feel myself being gendered every day? Consciously and unconsciously, all of these questions had been swirling around in my head for years, but now they had kicked into high gear. My gender identity was like a volcano that I had determined—no, decided – would lie dormant several years back when I realized how overwhelming it all was. Occasional gender earthquakes had rumbled their way through my life, shaking me up but then leaving me in some measure of peace. But smoke had started forcing its way through the cracks again that summer and now earthquakes were getting more numerous. Having long considered whether I would eventually have a mastectomy and chest reconstruction, I had just decided that very week to finally do it. I had gotten to a place where I could imagine my chest flat, with semi-circular scars and grafted nipples, and the image felt sacred, holy, even sacramental. Of course there would be scars, I had realized. Scars represent where we have been, who we have been, and serve as a reminder of how we are always being transformed. This major decision brought on a new question, one upon which I could act sooner than surgery: what to do about my name?

In one sense, I had always liked my given name of Catherine. I had loved that it started with a C, not a K, and that it was "-erine" and not "-ryn" or various other permutations. My parents, I had been told several times, had wanted to name me Holly. But then, as my dad would say with a certain tone of pride, "we took one good look at you and said, 'This baby is not a Holly. This is a Catherine—a Catherine with a C.'" *Thank God!* To my dad I'd always been "Big C." I used to dance around the living room to Cookie Monster singing "C is for cookie that's good enough for me... *Oh cookie, cookie, cookie starts with C!...*" C was my letter. All through elementary and high school I was the only Catherine I knew. But then in college I was just one of many. I even began to notice that there appeared to be two distinct kinds of Catherines: maculine-

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<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:1-2. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

leaning and feminine-leaning ones. Seriously, the name seems to have a certain power that gets harnessed in rather butch forms on the one hand, and sort of voluptuous, feminine ways on the other, almost as if the two express a reaction against each other. As one who never grew out of my tomboy “stage” I can now see that I was never very comfortable with this strange dynamic in my name. I was further disappointed to learn that Catherine means “pure.” Nicknames only helped to a point. I especially detested being feminized as Cathy. Then some friends started calling me Cat one summer at camp. I liked its androgyny, and later I even had a “Cat in the Hat” t-shirt for good measure. Eventually I had started wondering if Cat could ever pass as a guy’s name, though. “Cat Stevens!” I thought, “One of my favorite singers of all time!” But by that fall I knew my gender expression exceeded the name’s capacity.

Over time, as I became aware that I was reaching the threshold of my name’s range, I had begun trying to think of a new one. Envious of transgender author and activist Leslie Feinberg, whose name seems to speak to his unique gender journey, I wished I had a name like that. I can recall filing through names in my head while driving to and from New Haven: Chris, Pat, Sam... but none seemed to fit. Then one day while back in Boston I went to get take-out at a local ‘Asian Fusion’ restaurant, ‘Jay’s’, whose name I had even considered in my covert name shopping. It was a Friday night at the end of a long week, and Kateri and I were in need of some excellent take-out sushi. She sat in the car, double-parked, while I ran in. I told the person behind the counter I was there for take-out. “What’s the name?” he asked. “Catherine,” I said. “Cameron?” he asked. “No, Catherine,” I replied, thinking, “Hm... but I like *that* name!” I ran back to the car with my bundle and breathlessly told Kateri, “I just heard a name I could actually imagine inhabiting!...Not that I wanna actually do that right now, but...” From that moment on, the name had been there, in my pocket.

Every now and then I would take the name out and ponder it, but never for very long. Until one week during that autumn, one year after my encounter with the first letter of John, as my gender identity was crashing all around me. I was sitting across the table from a friend, talking about these matters, when she asked me, “have you ever considered changing your name?” I was mildly surprised. “Actually,” I replied, “I have.” I proceeded to tell her about how the name Cameron had come to me at Jay’s. Her eyes lit up, “oh, that’s a great name—I could totally see you with that name!” That was food for thought. And that was a Tuesday afternoon. Four days later the name just would not leave me alone.

So there I was on the afternoon of Saturday, October 14, wondering what it would be like to inhabit the name Cameron. “Cameron Partridge, Cameron Partridge...” I kept repeating to see how it sounded. Where was this going? “Okay, fine, let me find out more about this name.” So I got online. I went to Google.com and typed in “names.” This took me epregnancy.com. I sat on the living room floor as banners of pregnant women floated across my laptop. “How appropriate,” I thought. I typed in “Cameron.” The website required me to choose whether I wanted the boy’s or girl’s version of the name. I chose the boy’s version and found myself staring at a series of comments from expectant mothers. Each mother would rate the name and then explain her rating. The first comment was from someone who put “no thanks” in the name slot. “It’s a little too wussy for a boy I think. It reminds me of the sickly wimp on *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*...Wuss!” “Hm, lovely,” I mused “No gender agenda there, eh?” The second entry reflected familial gender angst, “I love the name Cameron. I think that it’s a sweet name. My husband on the other hand thinks it’s too girlish. I had chosen Cameron Jordan. But he says no.” Dad’s afraid of having a ‘mama’s boy,’ eh? I read on. After one positive comment, another mother explained, “Our son is named Cameron Garrett. The only problem I see with the name Cameron is the ability for people to shorten it to Cam. I cannot stand that nickname. I think Cameron suits my little man just fine.” “Aw, your little man—how very cute!” I chuckled, “But what’s wrong with Cam?!” I happen to like that nickname. After all, there’s Cam Neely! The name was growing on me. Then this

comment caught my eye: “I love this name. I named my oldest son Cameron and it fits him very well. It’s a great name...very masculine.” Very masculine—interesting how the same name could be seen by one person as “wussy” and by another as manly. Another woman commented, “Cameron is a strong name.” I liked that. Then the following comment made me wonder what on earth the name could mean, “We are going to name our second son Cameron Reilly Michael. We all know what Cameron means, Reilly means courageous and Michael means like God... Everyone we’ve told the name Cameron to absolutely loves it and it is a name that will suite a child or an adult. Our son is due in June and he already has nicknames (from my husband) ‘Cammers, Cameroon, Crazy Cameron’ It’s cute.” Cute indeed! And once my family could get over what would surely be an initial period of shock, perhaps they could keep my own crazy nicknames, which I realized would still work with this new name... But what was this “we all know what Cameron means” business?! This comment, plus a final reflection piqued my curiosity: “I absolutely loved this name. I have a guy friend that made fun of it because of Cameron Diaz, but I checked it out and it’s originally a boy’s name. So far I have seen the meanings: crooked nose, crooked stream, crooked hill, crooked individuality. Well, whatever the real meaning... he’ll be crooked!” Choosing to ignore the Cameron Diaz comment, I had to double-check those meanings. I clicked on “definition” and read, “Cameron: Celtic Origin, Meaning: *Crooked nose. Nickname of a Highland chieftain with a crooked nose.*” The name essentially means *bent* or *crooked*—“*Oh my God! It means QUEER!!! What could be more fitting?!*” I said out loud, our two cats peering quizzically at me. I had long equated ‘bent’ or ‘crooked’ with queer in my head, and had laughed with glee when I once heard Frank Griswold, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, pointedly preach the saying from Ecclesiastes: “Consider the work of God; who can make straight what God has made crooked?”<sup>6</sup>

So I sat there on the floor, letting it all sink in. I could feel the name staking a claim on me. There was no mistaking it. It had to be mine. “Shit.” The process of asking my loved ones to call me this, to recognize my trans identity in this very conscious way, was bound to be painful. But nothing could have been clearer than that this was my name. So overwhelming was this revelation that I lay there on the floor for a long time. This felt to me like *kairos*, God’s eternity breaking into my *chronos* time. I recalled how the first eleven women ordained priests in the Episcopal Church in the United States experienced their moment. Carter Heyward and Alla Bozarth-Campbell had both referenced the concept of *kairos* in their written reflections.<sup>7</sup> “The ordination was not simply an ‘event’ in the life of the Church.” Heyward recalls, “It was part of a *process*, which neither began nor ended in Philadelphia. A process in which *kairos* bursts—intrudes—into the order of things. A process in which the Spirit moves, renewing the church. In it, and with it, and by its holy power, we are graced to move with this God to court, celebration, and peace.”<sup>8</sup> To me it was as though the living room had suddenly become the throne-room of the Almighty, that cherubim and seraphim were calling back and forth to each other “Holy, Holy Holy” right there in my presence.

After settling down a bit, I tried to call Kateri. I longed to hear the warmth of her voice. Maddeningly, though, her cell phone was out of range. I knew she and an old friend of ours were in the mountains, and that she might well have to call me by the cabin’s landline, whose number I didn’t have. I then called my sister. I figured she would probably be understanding of this latest twist and serve as the excellent soundboard she always is. After all, only a few months earlier, when we had been remarking upon our dad’s new beard over the phone, she had suddenly asked,

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<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:13

<sup>7</sup> Alla Bozarth Campbell, *Womanpriest: A Personal Odyssey* (New York, Ramsey, N.J., Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978) 129-130.

<sup>8</sup> Carter Heyward, *A Priest Forever: One Woman’s Controversial Ordination in the Episcopal Church*. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1976, 1999) 132.

“have you ever wished you had a beard?” When I paused, aghast that she’d stumbled upon this secret desire, she had said, “Geez, if you have to think about it...!” I’d then admitted that, yeah, I did think facial hair would be very cool. I’d since told her I understood myself as trans, definitely not female, and certainly not stereotypically male. She’d been very supportive. So now she listened to what had just happened with my name, and her response was instantly reassuring. Plus she really liked it. A while later Kateri called. She was supportive, loving, and excited for me, and she was also terrified, wondering if I was going to eventually transform beyond recognition. I had no concrete answers for her, and we tried to console each other in both love and fear. Nevertheless I finally went to sleep feeling very alone.

When I woke up Sunday morning I felt like I’d been run over by a train. The previous day’s revelations and conversations hung heavily on my shoulders. I dragged myself to church and was asked when I arrived if I could do the first reading for someone who couldn’t make it. I agreed and took the bulletin to a seat to review the text. It was from the thirty-second chapter of Genesis and described Jacob’s impending confrontation with his brother Esau and four hundred men. After sending servants ahead with presents to appease his brother, that night Jacob had taken his family to the other side of a stream leaving him alone. There, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ So he said to him, ‘what is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please, tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask me my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’”<sup>9</sup> Reading this first in my pew and then aloud during the service from the lectern, I felt as though I was recounting not only my own previous night, but also the past year. I was astounded to come to the end of the passage, where God gives the protagonist a new name. I had long known of this biblical pattern of re-naming, and had studied the significance of naming in Genesis as well as in other texts, but that morning I truly understood its significance for the first time. It was as though God was responding to my latent fear in all that I was undertaking, as though God was taking me by the hand, reassuring, blessing, and giving me a new name.

I started using my new name almost immediately. The more I shared it with the people in my life, the more organic it felt. In November, I finally broke down and asked my dad if business might bring him to my city soon—we needed to talk. Within a week of my request we had lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. It was a strange reprise of a conversation we’d had nine years earlier, when I’d come out to him as gay at a Chinese restaurant. Walking out of the restaurant afterwards, he’d put his arm around me and come out to me as a smoker. Sitting across the table from him now, I told him about this new twist in my crazy journey. When I got to the part about my name not working anymore, he couldn’t stand the suspense. “Did you choose a different name—what is it? *What is your name?*” He was looking at me with intensity, but was smiling at the absurdity of the question he’d just asked. My own dad, who gave me the name Catherine instead of Holly, now was asking me what my name was. “Cameron” I told him. “Cameron” he repeated, “okay... that’s gonna take some getting used to.” Then he asked why I’d chosen that name rather than a more masculine name. This response reminded me a bit of the reports of the dads on the epregnancy website. Of all the aspects of my transition with which my dad struggled, the name seemed to crystallize the very real sense of loss. Four months later, after numerous difficult exchanges, this name became the catalyst for an estrangement from which we still have not recovered; where

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<sup>9</sup> Gen 32:24-30

before I had signed emails “C”, I now signed a sharp retort with my new name. His response began with a reassertion of my old name and ended with an expression of love and then an unspeakably painful “God bless, good luck, good bye.”

Almost one year later I learned of another father-child exchange that somehow gives me an odd sense of hope. While reading John Colapinto’s *As Nature Made Him*—the story of David Reimer who, after a botched circumcision, was raised as Brenda – I got to the point where Ron Reimer tells his daughter Brenda that she had been born a boy. Ron had picked up then teenaged Brenda from a doctor’s appointment and taken her for a conciliatory ice-cream cone. After pulling into the family driveway he finally “found the words he needed.” As he spoke, Brenda “just sat there listening, real quiet,” Ron says, almost two decades after this extraordinary encounter between father and child. “I guess she was so fascinated with this *unbelievable* tale that I was telling her.” Brenda did have a question for her father. It concerned that brief charmed span of eight months directly after her birth, the only period of her life when she had ever been, or ever would be, fully intact. “What,” she asked, “was my name?”<sup>10</sup> Originally his name had not been David. It had been Bruce. When he chose to transition back to male, he purposely chose a different name, actually picking two and letting his parents choose which one. David had especially appealed to him because of the Hebrew Bible story in which, against all odds, David had defeated Goliath. I loved that. And reading of David’s parents’ honest, human struggle with the choices they made, I find myself reaching out to my dad in mind and heart, hoping for reconnection.

But months earlier, on that crisp October morning, with both trepidation and elation, I knew that claiming my name was just the beginning. I felt – as I still keenly know—that I had a long, difficult, unknown journey ahead of me. On that morning, bent as the day I was born, I was filled with gratitude. Even in the midst of ongoing struggle, I had the sense that God was telling me that, like David, and like Jacob before him, I had somehow prevailed. In words to which I know I will always need to return, St. Paul articulates palpably what I felt: “We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive...”<sup>11</sup>

*Come down O Love Divine, seek thou this soul of mine and visit it with thine own ardor  
glowing; O Comforter draw near, within my heart appear and kindle it, thy holy flame  
bestowing.*

*O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;*

*And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight, and clothe me round the while my path  
illuminating.*

*And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long shall far outpass the power of  
human telling; for none can guess its grace till Love create a place wherein the Holy Spirit  
makes a dwelling.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised As a Girl*. (New York; HarperCollins Publishers, 2000)180.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 6.8b-9a

<sup>12</sup> Bianco da Siena (d. 1434?); tr. Richard Frederick Littledale (1833-1890), alt. Music by Ralph Vaughan Williams, “Hymn 516,” *The Hymnal* 1982, (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1982).

# Holy Week

—Cameron Partridge

*Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

“And here we offer and present to you, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto you....”<sup>2</sup> Every week from about seventh grade through high school I recited those words in my head, along with the celebrating priest in the small Episcopal congregation I attended. Something about the phrase always captured my attention, even though it came near the end of what often seemed an interminably long series of prayers. It just seemed to get at the heart of the matter of Holy Communion; that phrase voices our human action in the intersection and exchange that takes place between the self-offering of God and that of God’s people on earth, “that [God] might dwell in us, and we in [God].” Every Sunday morning I prayed those words with careful intention, and yet something about them, or about my own efforts, always felt slightly off. An insistent question would swirl around my head: what does it mean to present one’s *body* to God as a vessel, a living instrument of praise? Lifting up my soul felt less complicated to me. It felt right and true, an offering of my very being. But this offering of body muddled the whole experience, making me feel like I was being slightly disingenuous. Disingenuous because I took very seriously a saying I’d encountered in my Latin class-- *know thyself*-- and I *knew* that my body felt wrong to me. More specifically, its gender felt wrong. I lived with a constant sense of disjunction between the way I felt and saw myself and the way almost everyone in my life treated me. And on top of that disconnect, I felt guilty about my experience and knew instinctively that I shouldn’t talk about it. That strange compound of wrongness and guilt had pervaded every fiber of my being for as long as I could recall. By the time I was reciting those words in my head, kneeling as an acolyte in the sanctuary, my body had begun cooperating with those around me who saw me as a female. The sense of foreign-ness was intensifying. So how, then, could I offer my body to God? Was it enough simply to avoid the issue of embodiment and just keep trying to offer my soul? The recurrent presence of that phrase “our selves, our souls and bodies” kept prodding me throughout high school.

In college and divinity school, however, the congregations in which I worshipped used different prayers. I had since come out as gay, initially assuming that my years of gender-discomfort were over, and had come to associate the familiar prayers of my growing-up years with my denomination’s struggle around the issue of sexuality. But when a progressive anthology entitled *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*<sup>3</sup> was published to address that wider Anglican conflict, I wondered if, at last, I had found a source to help me through my own longstanding muddle. Just as it had when I was growing up, the title phrase had sounded off in my head like a bell. My partner Kateri gave me the book for Christmas in 1996, inscribing it “that you may come to better understand and integrate all the wonderful parts of you!” As I perused the book, once again, I found myself curiously detached from what I assumed would be a consistent undertone of celebrating embodiment. Again I wondered how to give thanks for and offer up a body that felt

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<sup>1</sup> “A Collect for Fridays,” *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979) 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 336.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Hefling, ed. *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Cambridge & Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1996).

wrong? That longstanding sense of alienation from my body's gender encoding had been increasing during my first year of divinity school. I had never been more aware of it than I did then; I could feel it hanging over my life like a dense fog, hampering me from living as fully as God intends.

During those years of college and divinity school I tried to make sense of my predicament by reading both theology and gender theory. Their intersection, I found, lay at the concept of "embodiment." As I encountered it in feminist theory "embodiment" did not prove very helpful to me. Nor did I find much help in forms of spirituality that are body centered. In fact, I downright hated them. I especially loathed yoga. I knew and respected the fact that such approaches to gender theory and to spirituality worked for many, but when it came to my life, focusing on my experience of embodiment proved a dead end over and over again.

So when one week, four years and numerous theological and gender-theoretical tomes later, my spiritual director<sup>4</sup> Claire introduced the topic of embodiment into our hour of prayer and reflection, I held my breath. This had been such a productive and safe space for me thus far—was that about to evaporate? Indeed, this very wise, patient woman had been totally nonplussed by my revelation the second week that I had come to view myself as transgendered and that I wanted to use spiritual direction in large part to make sense of my gender journey, to consciously invite God into it and cultivate an awareness of how God was already at work in it. Not only had she been totally accepting, she had seemed downright pleased to be working with me around this topic. But when she raised the issue of embodiment I tensed up, concerned that certain (to use the gender-theoretical term: *essentialist*) well-worn paths of bodily interpretation were going to get imposed on me as they had so many times before.

That day we had begun our time customarily with the prayers Claire would read from various sources, especially the Anglican priest Jim Cotter. But then she had paused to tell me that this week she'd been inspired to share a poem by another spiritual writer, Anthony DeMello. In fact, she explained, she had used this poem in spiritual direction with survivors of various kinds of abuse. Obviously, being trans was a significantly different issue, she said, yet something about the poem had struck her as potentially helpful. I had the sense—in fact she may have professed it herself—that she felt she was taking a significant risk in using this same material with me. I respected both her instincts and her caution. So I hunched forward, perching myself on the edge of my chair, elbows on knees, eyes closed, trying to open my heart to whatever wisdom the poem might have to offer. In a steady voice, she began to read:

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<sup>4</sup> Spiritual direction is vaguely akin to therapy only the focus is on one's relationship to the divine and how one participates in that relationship (e.g. how one prays), what it's like, etc. Spiritual directors are trained to guide people who want to focus on their life of prayer. Sometimes people meet with a director as often as once per week, but more often it's something like once per month. I met with mine for one year, once every two to three weeks. I am so grateful for the insights I gained through that work. I am also incredibly grateful to my therapist with whom I also worked for a year, beginning a few months after I finished spiritual direction. I highly recommend spiritual direction as well as therapy to anyone in discernment around gender issues. For a guide to the tradition of spiritual direction in my denomination, see Peter Ball, *Anglican Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998).

## THE VESSEL

*I ask God for a special kind of body  
and get the one I have right now.  
What thoughts and feelings do I have about this  
body?*

*We hear of saints who hated  
or were neutral to their bodies.  
What attitude is mine?  
Where did I get it?*

*In the blueprint I have drawn up for my life  
how does my body help or hinder?*

*If it could speak,  
what would my body say about the blueprint?*

*My relationship with my body  
powerfully affects my life for good or evil.  
The finest way to heal,  
or deepen, the relationship  
is dialogue.*

*My body must be frank in expressing its  
resentments—  
and its fears—of me.*

*I must be just as frank.  
We keep at it till we are reconciled  
and understand and love each other better.*

*We must then state explicitly  
our expectations of each other.*

*Before we end the dialogue  
I ask my body for a word of wisdom.*

*Scripture reveals my body's spirituality.  
It says my body is God's temple,  
the spirit's dwelling place.  
What does that mean?*

*It further says our bodies are not ours but Christ's,  
so he can say of me, "This is my body."  
Again I wonder at the meaning of those words.*

*I see myself go through the actions of the day  
(eating, washing, playing, sleeping)  
with the consciousness  
that my body is the home of the divine.*

*Or caring for it  
as for the body of my beloved.*

*Finally I speak to God about my body.  
and listen as [God] speaks to me*

<sup>1</sup>

As I listened, at first, I felt quite tense. But then I began to appreciate the probing, inquiring spirit of De Mello's words. What *is* my attitude to my body and where did I get it—that's a damn good question, I thought. My relationship with my body does indeed powerfully affect the rest of my life, for good or ill—no doubt. Then Claire read the lines about my body needing to be "frank in expressing its resentments—and its fears—of me." That line struck a chord. And I can still hear her saying, clear as day, "I must be just as frank." Indeed. Then the question as to what on earth it means for my body to be God's temple echoed in my head, closely followed by the equally enigmatic and rich concept that Christ could say of me, "This is my body." Speaking to God about my long-standing sense of alienation from my own body was long overdue on my part. This poem became a springboard, a wellspring to which I repeatedly returned.

Why did I feel so repelled by questions of embodiment? I knew it had everything to do with my gender. What then to make of the fact that my body, which was to be a temple of the Holy, felt so alien to me? I surely did not feel the Spirit at work in my bodily alienation, and no amount of trying to accept my body as-is was going to help with that; I'd been trying that for

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony De Mello, S.J., "The Vessel" in *Wellsprings: A Book of Spiritual Exercises* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985) 23-24.

years. Where was the Spirit, the Holy One, God, in this profound, ongoing sense of dis-integration? It wasn't that God felt absent to me on the whole—I had sensed the Spirit working in my life for years and in ways I could never predict, but it was never connected with my body. Often I sensed the Spirit in the words and actions of others, in reading, listening, in relating. But not in my body. This wasn't a fact of which I was proud. Especially, again, because I was fully aware of the rich contributions being made to theology by feminist theologians, concerning the intersection of the body, the erotic, and God. But I just wasn't there. Nor did I consider myself some sort of trans Neo-Platonist. I believed the fact that we all have bodies is significant, neither all-important nor meaningless. As my partner's book inscription had forecasted years before, I wanted to find a way to integrate my experiences, whatever they were, but so far all efforts of making spiritual sense of my body fell short. On the whole, in fact, they tended to make me want to puke. They tended to use spiritual terms to articulate "normal" gender customs.

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I'll never forget my grandmother, whom I adored, greeting me at the door of her real estate office after school one day. She worked just across the street from my bus stop. No sooner had I walked in the door than she reached under her desk and said at a volume that might as well have been enhanced by a bullhorn, "I got you a *bra!*!" God help me. I was utterly humiliated. I don't recall exactly how old I was, but it was later than the other girls as far as such rites of passage were concerned. I was a "late bloomer"—an even more appropriate epithet now, it seems. Gramma had noticed what even I had recently admitted (to myself) was happening. It had really hit home when I'd seen a picture of myself with the rest of the Middle School Choir in a newsletter. There were about fifteen of us, so it was easy to pick myself out. We were all standing in a semi circle with hands clasped behind our backs, chests puffed outwards. When I looked at the photo, what shouted out to me was this startling, raised horizontal line across my shirt. It was like a neon sign proclaiming: this one's getting breasts! There was no longer any denying that I was a girl. Not that I had literally thought otherwise on a conscious level. Not since I was quite little anyway, and even then I didn't think I was a boy so much as that it was ridiculous that I wasn't, and that perhaps, somehow, it could still happen. My ninety-two year old grandfather to this day sums up my childhood attitude toward my gender by imitating my six-year-old response to my mom who had told me to wear a dress to a party "because that's what girls do": "*Don't you understand?!*" I screamed, "*I don't want to be a girl, I want to be a boy!!*"

Getting breasts was the single most horrible thing that ever happened to me. Well, maybe the second worst thing ever. "At least they probably won't get very big," I consoled myself. The idea of breasts dragging me down while I ran around the playground playing football, baseball or basketball was a nightmare. Several close female relatives were pretty small-chested—that boded well, I thought. But as luck would have it I ended up being somewhat of a family fluke, having a much bigger bra size than any of my immediate family. Except Gramma. Gramma was, well, grandmotherly in her proportions, and I was terrified I would becoming like her—44D. Thankfully that never quite happened. But I nearly fainted the time she offered to give me old bras she no longer needed—*she actually thought I could wear those?!* I screamed inside my head as I walked out of the room.

My grandmother seemed to have my feminization as a pet project. The bra-buying and (attempted)-sharing incidents were just two in a long string of embarrassing moments. Once, I was reaching into her medicine cabinet to get her some aspirin when she commented from her bed, "You do have nice figure after all!" I hadn't known she'd been appraising it. She then told me I could still improve it by doing certain bending exercises. Other times she had warned me that I shouldn't throw the ball so hard in the backyard with my grandfather because I would develop

muscles that were too masculine. What was becoming, she explained, were long lean muscles, not short fat ones. Then there were the shopping trips. She liked to buy clothes for my sister and I on occasion, and for me this always meant close encounters of the jealous and humiliating kind. One incident in a shoe store burned itself into my memory. I was about six or seven, and was determined to get new sneakers that (I just knew) could enable me to beat my best friend Jesse in a running race. As always, I gravitated to the cleats, the shades of dark blue, the—“*no, no, those are the boys shoes!! Come over here to the girls side.*” The saleslady and Gramma were in cahoots. I turned various shades of purple. All the girls’ shoes were pink, or baby blue at best. I couldn’t stand them. “Why can’t you act like a young lady?” Gramma would ask me later? I didn’t know. I just couldn’t. It killed me. And Gramma knew that, too. She loved that about me, admired it, and even to some extent identified with it, paradoxically. That was the source of our deep bond. We just understood each other. But that understanding never enabled her to stop trying to make a lady of me. Countless times in the years that followed, through high school and visits home from college and divinity school, she would slide catalogs to me across the kitchen table, corners folded over to mark dresses and skirts in which she envisioned me. Every time I walked into her kitchen she would look me up and down with a critical eye, commenting on my appearance. “Jeans are for shoveling manure,” she had commented more than once. I’ve always loved the colors gray, dark blue, cranberry or port, forest green, but she urged me to wear bright colors, so much so that Gramma’s refrain “*I love you in red!*” has long been an inside family joke. Two days before she died, when I was twenty-seven, while lying in her hospital bed, she asked my mom, “When will we ever get Catherine to wear dresses?” Though Gramma was and will always be one of my tall trees, her repeated insistence as to how I should adorn—and ultimately embrace—my physical form helped to drive further the ever-present wedge between my soul and my body.

At the same time as I pushed up against the feminine expectations that made me miserable, however, I also found outlets, and familial support, for being myself. These too, shaped my experience of embodiment. Recently I asked my grandfather if he had a “zoot suit” I could borrow. A friend was throwing a 1940s themed party, and I thought I remembered Gramps mentioning he’d liked this style in the past. I’d also frequently tried on Gramps’ clothing when I was growing up, so the request wasn’t that unusual. One picture of me with three friends when we were about five shows us wearing Gramps’ absurdly huge Navy uniforms. Another shows me about five years ago in a reprise, wearing the same, now perfectly fitting outfit. When recently I discovered that my hands remembered how to tie a Windsor knot, I realized that Gramps had taught me. His response to my request surprised me, “I don’t have a zoot suit, Champ-- the Gamma would never let me wear one. She thought they looked too radical. Only the fringe people wore them, and she didn’t like that.” At a restaurant for “the Capricorns” birthday dinner a couple of weeks later (Gramps, my mom, sister, and partner all fit into that category), he recalled the suit request. “So Champ,” he asked, “do you have two wardrobes now?” I was a bit confused, and frankly shocked that Gramps was directly addressing the subject of my transition. “No, just one.” He persisted, “what did you do with all your old clothes—get rid of them?” As if I’d had a ton of dresses to begin with? “Yeah” “—When did you get rid of them?” “Oh, gradually, over the years.” “Well don’t get rid of them all—you might just want to go back someday.” “Oh Gramps, no, those days are gone.” This exchange followed one that took place while I had been away from the table. Upon my return, my partner had leaned over quietly to relate, “We were just discussing what bathroom you use now.” I’d looked at her incredulously, “The men’s room.” “I know that, your mom and sister know that, but your grandfather wondered.” “What?!” She winked at me. Later she recounted Gramps chortling, “So, what bathroom do you think the Champ uses now, the men’s room or the ladies room? Or maybe both?!” No one replied. Gramps seemed to have come a long way from his declaration to my mom the previous year after I had told him I was transitioning from female to male: “The Champ’s got a serious psychological problem.” Yet like Gramma,

Gramps loved this part of my personality that was manifesting itself now in my transition from female to male. He had reveled in playing ball, punching his basement punching bag, teaching me wood-working and archery—even to the point of calling me “Champ!” And yet he couldn’t seem to grasp the continuity between the little person with whom he’d played and the adult who was now fully and finally choosing to be himself in body as well as in soul.

Though it was my mom and not Gramma and Gramps who raised me, somehow their exclamations, their expectations, their pride and shame in my gender difference loom particularly large in my memory. As I hear Claire reciting the words *I must be just frank* in my mind, Gramma and Gramps and the complexity of their abiding love leaps onto this page. “It’s probably no accident that you didn’t decide to transition until after Gramma died,” my mom commented to me a few months after I made my decision. Yes, that certainly is true. Over and over Gramma has come to me in my dreams, and each time I foggily realize that she has died. When this thought comes to me, I turn to her and tell her how glad I am to see her, and she hugs me. Once I asked her what her life was like now, what she experienced—did she feel like she’d finally arrived at God’s very Presence, as though the journey truly was over? “No,” she replied, “it’s more like ‘Guide Me O Thou Great Jehova.’” I woke up, looked in my hymnal, and cried in recognition of one of my favorite hymns:

*Guide me, O thou great Jehova, pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me in thy powerful hand; bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and ever more, feed me now and ever more. Open now the crystal fountain, whence the healing stream doth flow; let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through; strong deliverer, strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield, be thou still my strength and shield. When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside; death of death, and hell’s destruction, land me safe on Canaan’s side; songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee, I will ever give to thee.*<sup>2</sup>

In waking reflection I’ve wondered what Gramma thinks about my decision to transition. On the one hand, I’ve assumed she would have had a hard time with it in this life. On the other hand, though, I believe she now has a perspective on things that neither she nor anyone else caught in the matrix of time can perceive, and so I sense that she understands. I also see us as on similar journey’s; all our mortal lives and beyond, I believe, we live in constant motion, moving ever closer to the divine and an ever truer realization and actualization of our selves as God draws us to become. Always, we are becoming. That’s certainly how I experience transition, and life as a whole, and I sense that Gramma was saying something similar in my dream.

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Somehow I feel as though this eternal striving, or “eternal progress” as Saint Gregory of Nyssa famously put it, has been and must continue to be instrumental to this process of transition, this embracing of the body that God has given me.<sup>3</sup> Eternal progress, an ongoing movement of body and soul towards union with the divine— this ongoing pulse or current in my life has always somehow been inextricably tangled with my gender. I don’t entirely understand it. What I can say for certain is that I reached a point right around the time I began a year of spiritual direction with Claire when I knew without a doubt that I needed to find a new way of understanding and relating

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<sup>2</sup> William Williams (1717-1791); tr. Peter Williams (1722-1786), alt. Music: *Cum Rhondda*, John Hughes (1873-1932) “Hymn 690,” *The Hymnal 1982*, (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* trans. by Abraham J. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978) 111-120.

to my body. My very survival felt as though it depended on it. Tectonic plates had long been moving beneath the surface of my everyday life, but there was now a blockage. Pressure was building up and had to be alleviated. As I prayed and reflected on this pressure, one potential action, one way of embracing my body, kept coming back to me, begging for scrutiny: chest surgery.

What I would give never to have had breasts. But just because I had them didn't mean they needed to stay. Some of my lesbian friends even joked about how apparent it was to them that I hated having breasts. Sometime over the previous couple of years I had gone online to see pictures of surgery results. At first I couldn't deal. The scars! They seemed so prominent to me. Why did that bother me so much? Did they signify sheer mutilation? What did scars mean to me? As I reflected on them I recalled words of Adrienne Rich that had resonated with me years earlier. In "Meditations for a Savage Child" she reflects on what one can know about the interior experience—literally the inside of the head-- of another person, particularly one wounded by and alienated from the social context in which one lives:

*The most primitive part  
I go back into at night  
pushing the leathern curtains  
with naked fingers  
then  
with naked body*

*There where every wound is registered  
as scar tissue*

*A cave of scars!  
ancient, archaic wall paper  
built up, layer upon layer  
from the earliest, dream-white  
to yesterday's, a red-black scrawl  
a red mouth slowly closing*

*Go back so far there is another language,  
go back far enough the language  
is no longer personal*

*these scars bear witness  
but whether to repair  
or to destruction  
I no longer know<sup>4</sup>*

This poem had led me to see scars as markers of passage, story-tellers of painful events and witnesses of survival. Scars do indeed bear witness to destruction—a destruction of life as it has been formerly. Nothing can ever be the same—in that sense scars mark death. Simultaneously they represent healing. But healing does not mean erasure of what has gone before. Rather, to me healing is a passage *through* what has happened already. What will be is always impacted by what has been. No amount of healing can make past experiences go away. That need not leave one in a state of permanent disillusionment— I have experienced enough unexpected changes in my life

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<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Meditations for a Savage Child" in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984) 180-181.

made possible specifically by losses and wounds that, unbearably painful as they can be, I nevertheless choose to, strive to embrace them and find some way of integrating them into my life. Not mere acceptance, but *integration*, and ongoing meaning-making. This is what the Christian story of death and resurrection means to me at its deepest level. “Whether to repair or to destruction I no longer know,” says Rich—yes, I know not either at various points. And so I try to find out.

Slowly I brought together the insights of Rich with the questions of De Mello: how might my own scars, past and future, emotional and physical, enable me truly to experience my body as my own, as God’s, even as the body of Christ? The scars, I realized suddenly, were the key to this whole enterprise. Were I to have a bi-lateral mastectomy with nipple grafts, as the procedure I was contemplating was called, I probably would have a specific set of scars. There would be two fairly prominent, curving lines marking where my breasts had ended, and these lines would be placed where (with some work at the gym...) eventual pectoral muscles might curve. There would also be thin lines around my nipples. On each side of my abdomen, under my arm pits, would be a tiny round dot of a scar marking the place where for one week drains would empty fluid from my reconstructed chest. In my case, given my complexion, all of these lines would probably start out red, then fade to pink and maybe finally to white. This would be reality, unless there was a problem in healing, in which case the scarring pattern could be different. Picturing this in my mind, it both seemed overwhelming and strangely appropriate that my chest should end up with such scars. Appropriate in the sense that they would symbolize the journey I’ve been on my whole life. They would mark the courage it would take to choose to embrace my body as my own and not simply as others would have me make meaning of it. These lines would mark years of pain, and the beginning of years of healing, neither canceling the other out but both weaving together into an ongoing, ultimately holy integration of mind and spirit, soul and body.

As these thoughts filled my mind another memory floated to the surface, crystallizing my train of thought into a specific image. It was a piece I’d studied in an Art History class years earlier, a small, carved ivory panel from the “Carolingian” period, the era of the French ruler Charlemagne in the ninth and tenth centuries of the Common Era.<sup>5</sup> It is “Doubting Thomas” from the “Magdeburg Antependium.” The subject of this ivory is a moment in the Gospel of John when the resurrected Jesus invites a disbelieving Thomas to believe that it is truly a resurrected, living Jesus who stands before him. “Put your finger here and see my hands.” Jesus invites him, “Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”<sup>6</sup> The ivory, as my textbook put it, shows Thomas explor[ing] the wound in Christ’s side in a kind of climbing, aggressive curiosity. Christ, his right arm raised to reveal his side, bends over Thomas in an attitude that wonderfully combines gentleness, benign affection, protectiveness, and sorrow. The figures are represented entirely within the context of emotion; the concentration on the single act of Christ’s revelation to the doubter, the emotional vibrations that accompany the doubt, and the ensuing conversion of Thomas determine every line of the rendering.<sup>7</sup>

What had first moved me about this image, and even its description, was the vulnerability of Jesus, allowing a skeptical Thomas to “explore” his side. Later another aspect of this scene and its depiction struck me, however: the fact that Jesus’ death is not smoothed over in this resurrection appearance. He is someone who has lived through one of the cruelest forms of torture conceived by the ancient world, and the marks of the suffering and death that ensued from it

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<sup>5</sup> “Carolingian Schools” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, third ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 290-291.

<sup>6</sup> John 20:27 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>7</sup> Horst de la Croix, Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: Ancient, Medieval and Non-European Art*, Eighth edition. (San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986) 336.

became crucial to the earliest Christians' conception of what resurrection meant. It meant engagement with suffering and death as means of new life and of healing. No turning away in disgust, no denial or sweeping the pain under the rug; resurrection and death are two sides of the same coin. Only through death, through confrontation with and acceptance of human finitude does new life become possible. For years the Church struggled with this intensely painful concept, refusing early on, to depict it in art through crucifixion imagery. But by the Middle Ages the wounds of Jesus were routinely and prominently displayed. In these depictions the scar on the right side of Jesus' body stands out, just below his nipple, as a red half moon.

As I drove down the highway towards school one late afternoon, suddenly I realized how closely FTM chest surgery scars resemble those Medieval depictions of Jesus. In my mind, something clicked into place. In some odd way this all was beginning to make sense to me. Medieval theologian Julian of Norwich meditated on the wound in Jesus' side as symbolic of the nourishing, ultimately creative role he plays in the lives of those who love him. She even went so far as to imagine Jesus as a Mother pregnant with a humanity whose cosmic birth takes place in and through Jesus' death.<sup>8</sup> For generations theologians have used the symbolic power of Jesus' body—his transformed and transforming body-- as a roadmap for the ongoing, nurturing relationship of living faith. "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body" St. Paul had said within just a few decades of Jesus' life.<sup>9</sup> Over a millennium later St. Francis of Assisi was marked by stigmata, and was followed by over 300 other individuals in this particular, peculiar brand of embodied faith.<sup>10</sup> This kind of identification was not simply a unique, individual connection with Christ; to be—or rather, ever becoming-- the body of Christ is a vocation to which all Christians are called both individually and communally. Generations of believers in Christianity's first few centuries had been emboldened to embody their faith in various ways. The various Christian ascetical movements arose out of a desire to live out a life of faith in concrete, embodied practices. The ancient Greek root of asceticism—*askesis*—emerges from athletic associations, meaning "exercise, practice, training" to convey generally a "mode of life or profession."<sup>11</sup> Christian asceticism's tradition of concrete, disciplined faith influenced the life of Father Damien de Veuster of Molokai nearly two millennia after the birth of Christ. Damien was a Romantic-era priest whose face, scarred by the leprosy he caught from the community in which he ministered, burned itself into my memory from the time I first read of him in fifth grade.<sup>12</sup> I have always been struck by how powerful, how concrete, how alive the faith of such individuals and communities can be. And how all of this is motivated not truly by fear, not by threats of retribution, but by love, a love so deep, so broad and so high that one's embodied life comes to take on its shape. This ascetical, practical trajectory of the Christian tradition suddenly shed new, unexpected light on the long-standing quandary of my own embodiment. I could suddenly see that its answer was written in the scars.<sup>13</sup>

As all of these images filtered together in my mind, I knew I would have chest surgery someday. When I wasn't exactly sure. "You'll know when it's time," Claire responded.

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<sup>8</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, the Long Text, ch. 6, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 6.17b

<sup>10</sup> "Stigmatization" in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1544.

<sup>11</sup> "Askesis" in Liddel and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, seventh edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889, 1991) 124.

<sup>12</sup> I don't know in which book I read of Fr. Damien when I was growing up, but I recently read a very interesting, cultural- and historical-critical biography of him by Gavan Dawes. *Holy Man: Father Damien of Molokai* (San Francisco, New York, Evanston, London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> This phrase was inspired by a song of Gary Chapman's that's long been a favorite: "Written in the Scars" in Gary Chapman, *Shelter* Arista Records, 1996.

I knew it was indeed time a year later, shortly after returning to Boston from California. During that year my partner and I had begun living apart for the two-year duration of her post-doctoral fellowship while I began my doctoral program in Gender and Theology. Upon finishing my first semester of finals, I knew I had to put a surgery date on the calendar. So I called up the office of the California surgeon with whom I had begun corresponding a few months earlier. I spoke with his assistant about the reasonableness of doing such surgery over my Spring Break: would I have enough recovery time? After some discussion we determined that it would be reasonable, albeit difficult. I was determined. So I made a surgery date: March 27<sup>th</sup>, smack in the middle of the week because the first two days were already booked. After hanging up the phone I looked at my calendar more closely: that was also Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter. I couldn't believe it! What an incredible coincidence, I thought. Well, now I could use Lent, the liturgical season that precedes that of Easter, to prepare spiritually for this huge step. Kind of like the projects I have sometimes taken up specifically for Lent in the past. The first time I observed Lent, in high school, I gave up chocolate. The year before, my partner had declared she was giving up apathy... this year, I realized with glee, I was giving up my breasts!...

The weeks flew by as I secured a loan and received some familial help in paying for my operation. I talked with other FTM brothers about what their experiences with chest surgery had been like. I tried to eat healthily, sleep well, and not get too stressed out about everything going on in my life. And yet as the date approached I felt like everything and everyone was grabbing hold of me as I walked along, trying to slow me down. My mom was extremely concerned I was making an irreversible mistake. Lesbian and straight friends alike expressed what to me felt like a strange sense of grief, like I was dying. I knew that part of me was dying, and that the loss was not limited to specific parts of my body, either; an old way of life would be no more. I knew I was making a first step, a leap really, into what was for me unknown territory. My way of being in the world had already begun to change, but this was to concretely and dramatically manifest that transition. On Saturday evening, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, I got on a plane and flew to California and my waiting partner.

Kateri and I had been talking about the possibility of chest surgery for several years, and at times the conversations had been quite rocky. After all, Kateri understood herself as a lesbian then, though sometimes as bisexual, and she was attached to the idea of her partner having breasts, regardless of how inaccessible they were to her. Terrified at how much change I would be ushering into our lives and our relationship, Kateri at first had refused to countenance the idea of chest surgery. But gradually, over time, her views had shifted. Compassionately and intimately, she knew how much I struggled with my body. One day she said to me over the phone that she'd had a realization: my going ahead with surgery (potential post-surgical complications aside) would bring about increased comfort in my body, and undoubtedly that comfort would benefit her as much as me. Needless to say, I couldn't have agreed more, and from that moment on it was full speed ahead.

The morning of Wednesday, March 27, we got up at the crack of dawn and drove up the coast to San Francisco. The sun rose over the Bay as we listened to our favorite song from the John Mayer album *Room for Squares*, called "3x5": "Today I finally overcame/ trying to fit the world inside a picture frame/ Maybe I will tell you all about it/ When I'm in the mood/ to lose my way but let me say/ You should have seen that sunrise/ with your own eyes/ it brought me back to life/ You'll be with me next time/ I go outside/ No more 3x5s."<sup>14</sup>

Somehow our directions misled us, and for a few tense minutes we got lost in a maze of San Francisco streets. Once we finally arrived at the surgery center I wrote out a large check and was ushered back to the pre-op area. A sweet, southern-accented, gay nurse peppered me with

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<sup>14</sup> John Mayer, "3x5", *Room for Squares*. (New York: Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 2001)s.

church questions as he got me ready. I then had visits from other nurses, the anesthesiologist, and Kateri while we awaited the doctor's arrival. But, uncharacteristically, he was late. I lay there under an increasing number of blankets while the nurses learned that the doctor had never been informed of a schedule change, and that he was on his way. Somehow, though, it just didn't matter to me. I lay there dozing while Kateri sat next to me, completely riddled with anxiety, she told me later. Finally the doctor came in to make pre-surgical marks. "I feel like I'm kneeling before the altar!" he joked at the awkward way he had to hunch in front of me in order to draw lines with a black marker where he would remove the breast tissue.<sup>15</sup> I asked him about the areas under my armpits—how would that look? "Well, I'll have to determine it as I go—it all depends on where the breast ends and you begin" he replied. *Where the breast ends and you begin*. There was a statement for the ages. Shortly thereafter the anesthesiologist came in and started to sedate me. They wheeled me down a hall into a tiled room and asked me to shift onto the operating table. As I lay there the anesthesiologist explained I was going to go to sleep momentarily. The doctor then walked into the room and as I looked up at him I noticed he was wearing a bright red skull-cap with a big star in the middle. Drugged out of my mind, I said, "nice hat! Where'd you get it?!" "Skull-caps.com" he answered. "What? You're kidding!" "No I'm not--Skull-caps.com!" And then I was out. Much later I remembered that last interaction and wondered if it had been a dream. But no, it hadn't; when I asked him about it he actually got out the hat.

Next thing I knew, I was in the recovery room. All I could think was "it's done—they're gone!" When the nurse saw my eyes open she went to get Kateri, and when she came around the curtain I greeted her with sleepy euphoria. A few hours later we were back in her apartment. I lay in bed propped with pillows, the pain starting to kick in, but happy as a clam. Calls started coming in from friends and family, including my mom and sister across the bay, who'd been at the hospital during my operation but had to leave before I was awake. Mom had been startled when the doctor had reported to Kateri and not to her. Not only was I ceasing to be her daughter but, she'd realized anew, I was an adult and Kateri was my next of kin. This decision for surgery had been very difficult for mom, but she had come around and was doing everything she could to be supportive of both Kateri and me.

The day after surgery I was feeling very tender but was eager to be up and around as much as possible. It was also Maundy Thursday, and I was determined to make it to a service. We had told Matt, the rector of Kateri's church, what we were going through that week, and took some measure of comfort that he was supportively aware of our process. That evening, my chest wrapped up as if in a vice and grenade-like drain bulbs hanging under each armpit, I got dressed and wobbled with Kateri to the service. Maundy Thursday marks the day during Jesus' last week when he has supper with his friends—"the last supper"—and asks that they break and eat bread and drink wine to remember him. "This is my body which is given for you," he said and we repeat every time we celebrate the Eucharist to partake of and give thanks for this incredible gift. My memory of the service is foggy, but I was glad to be there, and incredibly thankful for the past two days. Afterwards I went home, took painkillers, and went to bed.

The next day I felt much better. It was Good Friday, the day Christians remember Jesus' death on the cross, and again it was important to me to be in church, to have a chance to reflect on this, one of the most important days in the liturgical year, and one of the most important weeks of my life. Kateri and I ventured over to church for an early evening service of remembrance. The sanctuary had been stripped of its colorful hangings and shiny surfaces over the previous two days, and now was starkly lit, with a "stations of the cross" around the walls. "Stations of the cross" depict fourteen distinct moments of Jesus' journey from his sentencing to death to his burial

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<sup>15</sup> Dean Kotula's book describes and photographically illustrates this surgery. Dean Kotula, *The Phallus Palace: Female to Male Transsexuals* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Publications, 2002) 181-184.

in the cave.<sup>16</sup> They are usually made up of an image with a written reflection or prayer underneath. You stand before the image, reflect on or pray with it, then move on to the next image. After the service a group of parishioners was doing the stations, and because people were reading at various paces, access to the small texts was getting awkward. Kateri therefore jumped a few steps ahead so she could read at her pace without hindrance. I moved along at my slower pace and, a few minutes later, noticed her sitting on a bench at the end of the church, head in hands, shaking. I had just broken off reading the last station at which I'd seen her, and it had been a meditation on giving up trying to control one's life through perfectionism, a topic with which Kateri was currently struggling. Oh God, I thought, this whole week has gotten to be too much for her. I walked over, sat down next to her and asked if she was okay. "Yes!" she choked out in a whisper, "I'm laughing!" "What happened?!" I asked, relieved. "Did you see the meditation on perfectionism?" "Yeah..." "Did you notice about half-way down..." I got up to finish reading it. Halfway down I noticed the typo. God offering us his *worm* instead of his *word*. Kateri and I practically ran out of the building and stood by the car howling.

By Easter Sunday, day five, I was getting tired of wearing the stiff binder, but was as eager as ever to experience church in my new state. By the time we arrived the place was packed and the only seats were up in the balcony, amid a large percentage of parents and small children who were decked out in pastel finery. By the time Matt had started preaching his sermon the jellybeans had started flying. Kateri and I ducked and hovered, straining to listen. But the message still rang clear as a bell: Easter is not something we simply observe like a movie or remember as a past event that's over and done with. It's something in which we *participate* throughout our lives. "We are participants!" He repeated. Brother, I thought, I couldn't agree more. Resurrection isn't something that we believe happens after we die. Resurrection, and the death that precedes it, happens throughout our lives. We participate every day in the Mystery that is Christ's death and resurrection. My own experience of the past week was all about death and new life. As I sat there I felt like a participant in Easter like I never had before. When it came time for communion I filed down the stairs, Kateri behind me, and made my way toward the line at the front of the sanctuary where Matt was handing out the bread. "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven" he or she is to say, and the recipient's response follows, "Amen." But when I got up to Matt and received the bread, I looked at him with a twinkle in my eye and said, "Participant." I didn't have time to see if he got it or just thought I was crazy, because Kateri and others were waiting behind me, so I moved on to receive the cup of wine from the next line. When I got back to my seat and Kateri sat down next to me she leaned over and said, "what on earth did you say to him?! His eyes were dancing and he had this huge grin!" "Thank God!" I said, and then I explained what I'd done. "You're such a nut-bar!" she replied, as the post-communion prayers began. On the way out of church we stopped to shake hands with Matt. I said, "Peace Matt!" "Peace Participant!" he replied.

I returned to Boston on a Tuesday night, red-eye flight after getting my stitches and drains out that afternoon. The timing wasn't ideal, but I had to get back for classes. Getting the drains pulled out was easily the most painful part of the whole ordeal. I couldn't believe how long the tubes were and how far across my chest they had reached. Once they were out and once the stitches were gone, though, it was as though I was a new person. I only had to keep the surgical tape on and to keep changing the gauze pad over the nipple grafts at shower-times. Once back in Boston I was terrified, and morbidly amused, that the nipples might somehow fall off-- I had nightmares about them swirling down the drain. On my second morning back I was toweling off when the phone rang. Instinctively I went to wrap the towel around my chest but then shifted it down and wrapped it around my waist so as not to hurt the grafts. I answered the phone and sat there, looking down at the towel around my waist and the water droplets dripping down my chest,

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<sup>16</sup> "Stations of the Cross" in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1538-1539.

hardly hearing the person on the line. Something in my head just clicked—I *get to put the towel around my waist with no breasts flopping above!!* It felt indescribably natural. The whole week was filled with strangely joyous moments in which various longstanding experiences of disjunction just started melting away.

Finally, that Sunday, I ventured to my Boston-area parish for the first time since being back and was greeted by people in the know with gentle hugs. This was the first Sunday after Easter, the Sunday when we always hear the story of Thomas who doubts that Jesus has really been raised from the dead. I sat in the congregation recalling my favorite Carolingian carving, described above. “Reach out your hand and put it in my side, do not doubt but believe”—these words suddenly took on that very personal reference that I’d foreseen two years earlier, in my work with Claire. Now here I was, feeling as though my friends, my family away from home, could practically reach out their hands and put them in *my* side, finally coming to believe and to see me as I saw and experienced myself. After the sermon and the “passing of the peace,” the priest, Steven, began the custom of making announcements. After they were finished, he paused for a moment and stared up at the walls beyond us, as if contemplating something. For a split second I wondered what he was thinking and then, suddenly, I knew.

“I’d like to ask Catherine/Cameron to come forward,” he announced. Catherine/Cameron was something those on the governing body of the parish had started calling me ever since I’d told them of my transition. But the rest of the congregation didn’t know, and I wondered if they even knew to whom he had just referred. “Oh boy,” I thought, “here goes.” But here goes what exactly? What was he going to say? I got up from my seat and walked forward, into the aisle to stand next to Steven, who put his arm around me. I had confided to him what I was doing months earlier and he had been an incredible support both to me and to Kateri. Steven then said that he wanted to ask the congregation for prayers of healing for me because I had just had surgery. He then interrupted himself, turned to me and said with a nervous, slightly goofy chuckle, “I didn’t tell you I was going to do this, but... would you like to explain to them what you’re doing?” I raised my eyebrows and we both stood there laughing for a moment. I wondered what I should do. I’d wanted to feel free to be out in my church setting for a while now but had decided to wait for a number of reasons. But in that moment I felt the unmistakable movement of the Spirit. So I took a couple of steps forward and said, “Some of you know this already, but I have begun a process of transition...” I paused and wondered for a moment if I should be vague or a bit more specific, then I opted for the latter: “from female to male.” Hooo boy there it went! I continued, “This has been an ongoing journey for me, and a difficult process for me, for Kateri, and in terms of my vocation. I have really appreciated the prayers and support you’ve given me already and I would love it if you could keep praying for me.” That was all I felt like I wanted to say. It was enough. So I stepped back next to Steven. He thanked me and asked that anyone who would like to could come forward and lay hands on me for prayers of support and healing, something this community does fairly regularly for various people. At this point I felt like I was going to burst, so I just looked down toward the floor and bit my lip as people began to move forward. Suddenly the smiling faces of three children entered my field of vision, one of whom, seven-year-old Judy-Lynn, wrapped her little arms around me in a hug. Her little sister Emily and friend Eliza took my right hand when I offered it to them. They stood there beaming up at me. I felt adult hands on my head and shoulders, and then Steven started to pray. It all happened in such a rush that I can’t recall what he said very clearly. But he started out, “God, you created us in your image male and female.” He thanked God for creating me as “Catherine” and he used the pronoun “she” and then thanked God for creating me “Cameron” and used the pronoun “he.” He invoked the name of the risen Christ who brings us into newness of life, and prayed for healing and strength in the days to come. Then it was over. The hands were lifted and I made my way back to my pew. I was

completely bowled over. I felt like just weeping, but was too stunned. The gravity of all of it all was almost beyond belief.

After communion Judy-Lynn sat down next to me and said, "I like the name Catherine better than Cameron. I'm sad." I replied, "I know Judy-Lynn, it's hard. My mom is having a hard time with this too, and so is my dad-- it's a hard thing. But I'm still me and I'll keep being me." She said, "I know." Then she said, "You're not a boy though-- you're a girl!" And I said, "well, but I'll stop looking as much like a girl soon-- I'll start changing a bit more" and she said "I know. So you'll kind of be someone who looks a lot like a boy but is sort of a girl too" and I said, "well kind of..." She kept holding onto my arm, and I kept biting my lip.

By the time I got home from that service I was completely drained. I flopped into my favorite chair and took it all in. What a week it had been. What a year it had been. And any day then I was to start on the hormone testosterone, ushering in changes arguably even more dramatic than those I'd already undergone. What amazing new life was springing into my world. I felt as though a huge ice-burg was very slowly beginning to melt, as though winter—long my favorite season of the year—was slowly shifting into a spring and a re-birth whose surface I'd barely discerned. Finally I found myself beginning to perceive how I can offer my whole life, my whole self to God, not just soul, but also body, an integrated personhood I can perceive anew as an unfathomable gift. As the author of the letter to the Ephesians wrote, "glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 3.20

# My Testimony I

—Louis James Mitchell

## John 3:16 – 20 (NSRV)

*Lord, I'd hear my momma praying,  
Praying for your will.  
I'd hear her in the evening  
praying for me still.*

*I knew not of your great mercies  
In the pardon of my sins  
I felt only fear and conflict  
turmoil from within.*

*She knew that I was a sinner  
a liar and a thief.  
But even in my madness  
you are my relief.*

*I came to Jesus, just as I was.  
An outcast, unworthy, afraid to speak your name.  
I cried out to you,  
Please Jesus, make a place for me  
Let me be who you want me to be.*

*I kept trying, Lord and praying  
reaching out for you.  
Willing and believing  
in all that you could do.*

*Though the church thought me unworthy  
I called upon your name  
And you loved me greatly  
even through my shame.*

*I grew to lean upon you  
to notice your sweet touch  
not to take for granted  
the love you gave so much.*

*I came to Jesus, just as I was.  
An outcast, unworthy, afraid to speak your name.  
I cried out to you,  
Please Jesus, make a place for me  
Let me be who you want me to be.*

*Your love has changed my heart, Lord  
Your grace has made me whole  
You've given me discernment  
You told me of my role.*

*In your blessed kingdom  
I now have a place  
I weep with joy just thinking  
of your amazing grace*

*Now it's you and me, Lord  
No church can intervene.  
the relationship I cherish  
is in John 3:16.*

*I come to Jesus, just as I am.  
Grateful to you for all that surrounds me.  
I sing your praises every day  
Thank you Jesus, for making a place for  
me  
Thank you for making me be who you want  
me to be.*

# My Testimony II

—Louis James Mitchell

## 2 Corinthians 5:16 – 21 (NRSV)

*Who I Am is the  
Reconciliation of Who  
I Was to Who I'm Becoming*

**I**  
*Vaseline shiny, neat plaited  
hair,  
Easter colored pretty dresses,  
black m'janes with laced  
ankle socks,  
my offering in my purse  
next to my gloves.*

*Hard to seek heaven  
dressed in such hell.*

*As early as I could  
I chased the boys.  
Spent all my time in their  
presence.  
Didn't realize 'til later,*

*Wanted to be them,  
not be with them.*

*Came out, stood tall and  
proud.  
A stone chasing femmes.  
More rough than my bros  
(thought I had to be).  
Cussing and fighting.*

*Hiding in large crowds,  
more noise within than  
without.*

**II**  
*At 23, ready to die.  
Seeing no other way.  
going, going, gone.  
Full of potential  
and other lies,  
darkest before the dawn.*

*I found a place  
or it found me  
with Steps, coffee and  
laughter.  
I found my God.  
I found peace . . .  
happily ever after.*

**III**  
*I used to dream  
of being a boy.  
playing boy games,  
chasing the girls,  
vaginal baptisms,  
bragging rights.*

*I used to dream  
of stalking my prey,  
working my stable,  
strutting and preening.  
the baddest rooster  
in the hen house.*

*Now I dream  
of learning her needs,  
communicating my own  
Listening, observing.  
Part of a team,  
both leader and follower.*

*I used to dream  
of being the King,  
lighting candles and incense  
on the altar  
of my accomplishments.  
Huey Newton with no politics.*

*I used to wish for  
wham bam and bling bling,  
fat stacks and big props,  
killer crazy rep,  
jail house machismo,  
and a skirt raising rap.*

*Now I dream  
of hearing your 5th Step,  
addressing the jury,  
mounting the pulpit.  
Mowing the lawn,  
PTA and little league.*

*Now I pray for willingness to  
grow.  
Being comfort to my wife,  
cradling our first born,  
holding a mortgage.  
Humility and grace.*

*Now I dream of being a man,  
submission to God's purpose,  
my daily bread,  
fidelity and forgiveness.*

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Louis James "L.J." Irving Mitchell-Villon

Born August 15, 1960, an activist, advocate, counselor, student.

Lover of life, history and tradition, a proud African-American, clean and sober, post-dyke, butch neo-tranny man. A seeker of truth and worshipper of God. Mr. Mitchell-Villon lives with his wife, Krysia, and their pets in Springfield, MA. He is currently a student at UMASS-Amherst studying the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, affectional preference and spirituality.

# Becoming an Ally

—Mary Sheldon

In April 1998, I spent a day following Daphne Scholinski—artist, gender activist and author of *The Last Time I Wore a Dress*—to various of her speaking engagements around the Northern Illinois University campus. I was a doctoral student in English with a graduate concentration in Women's Studies, and I was developing a proposal for a special doctoral exam area focusing on gender theory and literary criticism. I was also developing, in those few hours, a minor crush on Ms. Scholinski. She was like the women I had always been drawn to—butch, tomboyish, smart, articulate, funny and at the same time uncompromising—like my partner in many ways, but more drastically so. Her body was lean, her breasts hardly noticeable, an unapologetic downy mustache and wisps of whisker on her chin, her clothing clearly from the men's department—she was mistaken for a young man or adolescent boy everywhere she went. I saw her participate in a pilot for the LGBT<sup>1</sup> Safe Zone project my partner was developing on campus. I saw her speak to a group of mostly LGB (and perhaps passing T) people about her experience of being institutionalized in two Midwestern hospitals during the entirety of her high school years, and about what this had to do with them and their own gender experiences. I saw her speak to a psychology class about the "Gender Identity Disorders" diagnosis in the DSM-III<sup>2</sup>, what it had to do with the listing for homosexual it had replaced, and how it was principally a diagnosis used on children and young adolescents, resulting in the institutionalization and abuse of millions of young people. She was obviously sane and of superior intelligence, and I was struck again and again by how courageous she was, how very out and entirely herself she was—not in her gender presentation merely, but especially this is where I saw her courage. When I asked her late in our day together about whether she identified as a transgender person, she asked me whether I had read Leslie Feinberg. I hadn't yet, although I have since read Feinberg's works of transgender history and activism, and think I understand now why Daphne asked: I think she wanted to know what I meant by "transgender." Although I would not have known myself at that point, if I could have articulated an answer, it would have been in the direction of transsexual—the idea of a person with the biological features of one sex feeling trapped in the body of "the other sex," and engaging in hormone treatment and surgery to transform the body into something like their experienced sex. Rather than wrestle with the complexities, however, Daphne spoke to me in terms I could understand; she explained to me that she thought of herself as a woman principally, and that she wanted to see the definition of woman expanded to include her. "But," she said, "I recognize that transgender people are my people. We are fighting the same fight."

Daphne's stories about her experiences had touched me deeply in many ways, but what had entered upon my mind with force was the way in which our lives had been chronologically and geographically close, yet experientially so very far apart. I had identified as bisexual since I

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender. This is the usual order of listing for resources and events on the Northern Illinois University campus.

<sup>2</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 1980 (261-66). Scholinski asserts that as the listing for "Homosexuality" was being phased out as a mental disorder in the 1970's and '80's (first changed to "Ego-Dystonic Homosexuality" in the DSM-III in 1973, and then removed from the DSM-III-R in 1987), Gender Identity Disorder was being phased in (first appearing in the DSM-III) as a means of replacing those perceived aspects of homosexuality most distressing to clinical psychologists—i.e., so-called "cross-gender" behavior. Scholinski further argued that the diagnosis is, in fact, designed specifically to target gender behavior early in children as a misguided attempt to prevent what is perceived as later resultant homosexuality (as if "cross-gender" behavior were actually a cause of homosexuality). This cultural conflation of gender expression and sexual orientation is why children are so particularly and tragically affected by the DSM diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder.

had first learned the word in my high school psychology class, knowing that I was sometimes attracted to young women around me—but of course not all of them—as well as some of the young men. It had later dawned on me that while I was attracted to so-called "masculinity" in women (I loved the tomboys), I didn't care for it in men, preferring tender-hearted, sensitive, imaginative fellows. As early as the fifth grade, some of these sweet boys had begun disclosing to me their interest in other boys; by the end of high school, I had already started to sniff out trends in gender expression—had begun a sort of catalogue of butch and femme, macho and sweet, and a tentative conception of gays and lesbians as gender rebels. I knew that the perception didn't always match the reality, however; I knew that some of my straight male friends—a bit of a nerdy bunch, in music and drama club—were harassed with gay epithets and sometimes brutalized, and I'd figured out that although the macho football players of my school were mostly embarrassing idiots who felt compelled to shore up their own masculine images of themselves, some of them felt the need precisely because they were gay. I knew that all of this humiliation was somehow connected to why people stayed closeted, but I was still angry when gay adults didn't come out, and I was somewhat impatient with lesbian and gay peers who failed to come to terms with their sexual orientation as quickly as the straight kids did. There were lots of kids who seemed really gay to me—lightfooted and sassy boys, toughhearted and determined girls—and I wondered why they avoided our safe little crew of queers.

Looking back, I see that I was impatient with my own gender process—impatient to know what it meant for a marginally successful girly-girl like me (a cheerleader in junior high, but always at the bottom of the pyramid, always a little too big and strong and substantial to fit in with the others) to be attracted to tough women and sweet men. It didn't occur to me until recently that those I counted among my gay friends then might not have counted each other, or even known of each other's existence, except perhaps in moments whispered on phone lines or at slumber parties. I had very much wanted to believe that Libertyville High School was a really safe place for people to be out—to be themselves. One boy, a dreamboat and the lead in many school plays, had come out publicly as bisexual, and everybody *I* talked to said they really respected him for it. And my family and their circle of friends was surely a safe place; my parents were close friends with a lesbian couple, and when I had told my mother about my new word for my sexual orientation the very same day I had learned it, she had said, "yes, honey—I think most people are at least a little bit bisexual." And my close friend and I had read books like James Kirkwood's *PS Your Cat is Dead*, Tom Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, John Irving's *The World According to Garp*—nobody at the mall bookstore had looked at us sideways when we'd bought these books, and no adult had shown the least interest in keeping us from them. Didn't all this demonstrate the safety of my world? Shouldn't people just get a little braver, I reasoned, and be who they really were?

Yet Michael Reese Hospital, where Daphne Scholinski had spent part of her incarceration for crimes against the gender code, had been a part of my geographical landscape. Michael Reese had run commercials on our local stations, and I knew them to be a respected institution; as a young adult I had visited a friend of mine at work there more than once. Daphne and I were agetates—she'd been just a year behind me in school. As I heard Daphne tell her story over and over again that day, it chilled my bones to think of my sweet boys and gutsy girls—my friends in queerdom, whom I had so steadfastly urged to come out and "just be themselves"—subjected to the horrors of the psych ward. I saw my error quickly. The world was not as safe as I had always wanted it so desperately to be. Somebody out there was still trying to turn us all into football players and playboy bunnies. I was horrified. Yet it thrilled me to hear Daphne speak. I realized that her truth was energizing—that I'd had fears all along that I was only just now, in my observation of her, facing down. I was reminded that facing fears can often open doors to self-expression. Listening to Daphne had been a useful process for me.

Daphne's visit had called to mind another friend of mine (also a product of Libertyville High School), Becky, with whom I'd recently been reunited. In the interim between visits, my friend had stopped plucking her whiskers, had developed an impressive goatee, had started referring to herself as Harriet/Harry,<sup>3</sup> and had opened a coffee shop in San Francisco known as The Bearded Lady—a haven for local musicians, poets, and performance artists. Her own art had likewise blossomed with her garden of hair; she had written a one-woman play, which had taken her on tour around the states.<sup>4</sup> Although I hadn't gotten to see Harriet's show performed, she had shown me the script—and I was impressed, especially but not exclusively because the former Becky had been a writer who didn't write. I'm embarrassed to admit now that I had found my old friend's new gender expression somewhat unnerving, yet I had also found it enlivening, and she had seemed more truly herself—more relaxed, more freely expressive, more creative, happier—than I had ever known her.

In the day that I followed Daphne around campus, and in the day after while my partner and I drove her to her next set of presentations in (yes, really) Normal, Illinois, my question to Daphne again and again was, “why does it make me so happy to talk about gender?” The question wasn't new to me—I had been writing papers about cross-dressing for the whole of my college career, and wondering why—but the urgency of it was. I asked Daphne the question as if she knew the answer and was keeping it from me. If she knew, she didn't tell me. It wasn't until much later, when I was talking to a gay man friend of mine, that I got to a piece of the puzzle. “Maybe it just feels good to get at the source of something that has had power over you,” he said. “Maybe it just feels good to figure out the machinery of oppression.” The words seemed foreign to me; after all, I had been a cheerleader and a sorority girl at various points in my gender journey. My interest in girls notwithstanding, I had spent a lot of time thinking about how to be attractive to boys. When a friend of my parents had said of me at age six that I was a bruiser, and that they should sign me up for football, I had been absolutely mortified, and had spent the rest of my public school years trying to be smaller and daintier. I liked to think of myself as the femme—or at least femmer—partner in my relationship. Was it possible for someone like me to be a gender rebel? The question was a puzzle to me, yet obviously, here I was on a career path, in the academy—in Women's Studies, even. And why was I more and more attracted to gender theory? Why did I always want to write about books with cross-dressing in them? Clearly there was something in all of this that represented my own gender journey—actual, desired, and fantasized—to me. Yet I knew that this was not all there was to the attraction I had to this area of theory and criticism, and to transgender people. It was becoming apparent to me that the story of gender was more complex than not only masculine and feminine, but also than butch and femme—that genders, not only within a single culture, but within a single person, were plural, even myriad, and often surprisingly fluid.

A lot has happened on my gender journey since that day when I was Daphne's shadow on campus. I've read a lot more. I've completed my graduate concentration in Women's Studies, and aced my gender theory exam. In 1998 I worked with a local group of activists to pass a city ordinance that changed the human relations code to include protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, and suffered the very public embarrassment of realizing I'd

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<sup>3</sup> I use the female pronoun in this section as I did at the time; my best recollection is that this was Harry's preference, but I use it as a way of honoring both Harry's history and my own. Harry describes his current pronoun preference this way: “i like ‘he’ better than ‘she’, but it's not sticky really, just a loose and smooth preference. both happen a lot” (Dodge, 12 October 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Harry Dodge has continued to have success as a performance artist, appearing as a central supporting actor in the indie film, *Cecile B. Demented*, and directing and starring in his own first feature-length film, *By Hook or By Crook*, which has shown at Sundance, winning won awards in the U.S. and enjoying screenings at independent film festivals around the world. Currently pursuing his M.F.A., Harry describes his thesis project as “about the politics & power of hybridity/american cultural mores pertinent to taxonomy/gender dysphoria on and on” (Dodge, 27 March 2003).

contributed to doing a thing that left out our transgender, transsexual and intersex family. In 2000 I helped to pass a second ordinance that prohibited discrimination based on gender identity and expression and helped to correct our error, and I grew to know and love and admire some transgender people in the process. I, too, learned first to interpret transgender stories in terms of my own experience—that is, of course, what we all do with each other's stories. The first thing I learned about cross-dressers and other transgender people (especially when they engage in activism) is that they help make gender visible—that in bringing their own complex, inter-categorical sex and gender into the bright light of day, they help the rest of us to see our own and each other's complex and inter-categorical gender. And because gender is a primary cultural category that influences and helps determine our every experience, every observer (or reader) has an experience of gender to illuminate. Beyond that, transgender folks bring up the question of categorization itself; they help bring to consciousness the idea that other categories heretofore thought of as essential, like race, or durable, like class, religion or nationality, are also more fluid than we knew. These questions are key; they form a large part of what transgender stories have to teach us, and they are at the heart of gender theory as it has been practiced so far, mostly by queer theorists and lesbian feminists. But this is not the whole story.

Transgender people—people whose gender expression and/or identity for a wide variety of reasons confuses or transcends traditional cultural ideals of “male/masculine” or “female/feminine,” to the extent that they no longer feel or are perceived to be represented by those categories—are not made for *use*. While transgender people cannot escape the symbolic role they have played in Western culture, that is not their only role. Transgender people have their own stories to tell. Although the theory and criticism I've practiced has owed an enormous debt to scholars such as Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Joan Scott, and Marjorie Garber,<sup>5</sup> this idea of the cross-dressed character as a transgender subject—a self, with a story to tell—is an element I have found lacking in their work. Transgender people and fictional characters are not mere symbols or vehicles, even in a literature often written to represent them that way; they have a life beyond the writer's intention, and they draw on and speak to the stories of millions of real transgender people, living and historic. Further, it is both poor ethics and poor theory for non-transgender gender theorists to use transgender characters merely as springboards for their own gender projects<sup>6</sup>—at least not without profound consideration of how their own gender identities and expressions, and the whole context of gender socialization, are problematic, in particular for transgender people. When we listen to the real first-person stories of transgender people (as with any self-identified oppressed minority), we should be listening, at least in large part, for what they want and need us to hear—what it will be useful to them for us to learn. Yes, their stories teach us about our binary M/F world—the world the rest of us function in, have grown accustomed to, might not see. But first and foremost, listening to transgender stories tells us about what it is like not to fit into that world; not to partly fit, not to strive to fit, but *not to fit*. First and foremost, transgender stories should tell us about transgender people.

The day that I followed Daphne Scholinski around campus, listening to her transgender story, was critical to my development as a gender theorist. My appreciation of her own story as her own, and of the many other transgender stories I've read and heard since then, has done nothing to detract from my sense of the symbolic importance of transgender people to the rest of us; indeed, I

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<sup>5</sup> I am especially indebted to the following in the early development of a framework of gender theory: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*; Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*; Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”; Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”.

<sup>6</sup> I use the word “project” here to indicate (non-pejoratively) a site of activism informed by theory and scholarship. I take for granted here that scholarship is consciously or unconsciously a site of socio-political activism; a “project,” then, is what that scholar or scholarship enacts.

am more and more convinced that their stories do, in fact, reflect and redound the gender stories of all of us—that they have tremendous power to help us see and acknowledge other gender stories, as varied and unique as every person on the planet throughout history. But I am also convinced that when we fail to uncover the first-person transgender stories that have been silenced, and to make space for the gender projects of transgender people—in failing to *do them justice*—we are robbed of the truth of their existence, and therefore also of the most important lessons they have to teach, about what it is like to be themselves—to be taunted, brutalized, violated, jailed, or killed, and then sometimes to transition to a better fit, or greater peace with not fitting, and perhaps be accepted and loved just as their courageous selves. Through it all, they show the rest of us (and each other) what it is like to be a person with a durable body or gender expression<sup>7</sup> that resists what is casually conceived of as a fundamental truth about humanity—the existence of two discrete, non-overlapping sexes, each with a corresponding set of behaviors “natural” to them.

Of course, there is no conceptual place to stand to hear this tale that is innocent of the strident, deafening sounds of gender normativity; Riki Anne Wilchins talks about how the term “transgender” has already “hardened to be come an identity rather than a descriptor,” and that she finds herself “increasingly invited to erect a hierarchy of legitimacy, complete with walls and boundaries to defend” (16).<sup>8</sup> One of the implications of language as a cultural re/producer is that listeners always hear a story that is part projection, part a spin on their own experience—there is no avoiding this. But when we fail to listen to transgender people, we miss not only their stories, but also some of the best lessons they have to teach about the rest of us. That gender is institutionalized, socially constructed, and repressive can hardly be in doubt in these early days of a new millenium; a key question put to us by first-person transgender stories—a question that would actually be useful to transgender people if we all asked it—is, what *else* is it? What is gender other than a socially constructed system of oppression? As neat as we have tried to make it, gender is not neat; nobody fits effortlessly into the tiny boxes marked “F” and “M”—reported to stand for female and male, but often in truth standing for narrow and rigid ideas of femininity and masculinity. If it is our intention to fit, we generally find we must sacrifice whole portions of our psychic selves to squeeze into these restrictive spaces. Yet in another way, these categories are inescapable; whether or not we want to or are able to fit into these boxes, from the moment we are born, each of us must contend with them, so that the selves that we become must be created in/around/of these little boxes. Transgender stories press us to ask, how are the selves we become

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<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to suggest that “body” and “gender expression” are mutually exclusive terms; part of what I examine in this study is how each flows into the other. Theorists have until recently been content to associate “sex” with biological markers *of* the body, like genitals and chromosomes, and “gender” with cultural markers *on* the body, like clothing, make-up, hair-style, and gesture. While I appreciate the usefulness of the distinction, I would suggest the case is not so simple. For example, hair is attached to and produced by the body. Millions of women daily remove many different kinds of hair in order to be considered more “womanly.” If women’s bodies naturally produce hair, why is its removal so commonly associated with womanliness? Penile and breast implants for traditionally-gendered people, and the surgical reconstruction so commonly performed on intersexed infants, are further examples of how naturally occurring features of the body are sometimes supplanted by culturally created versions of bodily features which tend to reinforce a dichotomy not uniformly produced in nature. The fact that transgender people cross, rather than reinforce, the lines of this dichotomy only further serves to demonstrate the mutual production of bodies and cultural norms. Gesture, gait, and body language are likewise enacted on the body, and in part determined by its innate and cultivated abilities and limitations. As I have continued to examine the ideas of “sex” and “gender,” I have become more skeptical about attempts either to wholly separate or collapse the terms.

<sup>8</sup> Wilchins’s aversion to identity politics, which she likens to “a computer virus, spreading itself from the host system to any other with which it comes in contact” (16), leads her to call for “the end of gender” (a call contained in the subtitle of her book)—more particular for the end of the “gender regime” which has created the pain of “having my body read against me (156, 147). What Wilchins is advocating, though, is not a “genderfree” society (which she suggests is impossible), but “the right to choose my own meanings . . . a freer marketplace from which to choose . . . and freedom from the constant threat of punishment for my choices” (156-57).

inextricably linked with gender? How might gender not only be repressive of, but also expressive of, true selfhood?<sup>9</sup> And how might our bodies symbolically project the self we most yearn to express; that is, how is it possible for us to make our bodies serve our gender projects? These are, I believe, some of the questions posed by transgender existence which, if asked, would yield results actually beneficial to transgender people.

A year prior to Daphne's visit to NIU, Leslie Fiedler—a great patriarch of American studies in the novel—had been the keynote speaker at the English Department's graduate conference, and I'd had the opportunity to hear him speak on the subject of his 1972 book, *Freaks*. Fiedler—who is much more myth critic than gender theorist, and certainly no feminist—had much to say about people who served a symbolic function as interrogators of cultural categories. Investigating principally the boundary between human and monster, Fiedler's work had led him to a discussion of many categories of boundary breakers, including hermaphrodites, wild men, bearded ladies, fat ladies, and others who might be on display at a carnival side-show.<sup>10</sup> At this particular gathering he spoke nostalgically of a time when the folks we now call little people were referred to as "dwarves" and "midgets" (and likened to elves and fairy folk) and talked about one dwarf acquaintance of his in particular who lamented the loss of his mythic status as a result of continued advocacy for his full rights as a human being. I was skeptical, to say the least; I suspected mightily that Fiedler had invented this fellow out of thin air, or at the least projected his own grief onto him, hearing only what he wanted to hear. As something of a "freak" myself, I had endured discrimination, harassment, and even violence as a child due to my larger- and fatter-than-normal body; I had trouble believing anyone would lament the loss of his or her freak status if it meant the prospect of gaining freedom from discrimination. What it was about my weight that had incensed my childhood tormentors to the point of doing me harm I had no idea, but I was completely willing to dispense with that set of projections, especially if it meant greater tolerance and acceptance of me and people like me. I knew what it felt like to have one's monstrosity on display; Fiedler could not convince me that anyone would miss that.

Despite my rejection of Fiedler's nostalgia, however, something about his story stuck with me; it initiated in me an exploration of the body as a symbolic space. When Daphne spoke a year later about how her body had betrayed her at puberty, I found I understood at a profound level what she meant: somehow my body had failed to symbolize and project what it was I yearned to express about myself. I had simultaneously wanted to reconstruct my body, and to reconstruct the system and tradition of myth and symbol surrounding my body which mapped symbolic values onto this most intimate of spaces. I have continued to explore Fiedler's work, and it has had importance to me as a catalogue of cultural meaning—often un-self-reflective, often hyper-unifying and -reifying, often patronizing and paternalistic, and always infuriatingly presumptive of an audience not inclusive of the "freaks" he describes, Fiedler nevertheless does work invaluable to gender theory in documenting not only cultural archetypes of extreme other-ness, but also their

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<sup>9</sup> By "selfhood" or "self" I mean the individuated personality of each person as it is experienced by that person. Obviously, each person's self is created from a sum of her/his experiences, including all kinds of cultural norms about gender, race, class, age, ability, etc. Just as obviously, culture has only a chaotic (not a random, but not a uniform or homogeneous or wholly predictable) influence on selfhood. Regardless, a person may or may not—generally or in any given moment—perceive her/himself to be a sum of cultural experiences, and in any case will have consciously or unconsciously adopted some cultural influences as self-representative, and rejected others as not, and this process will be ongoing. "True selfhood," then, might be defined as that set of ideas, experiences and influences with which a person identifies, and which represent that person to that person.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting here that in *Freaks*, Fiedler identifies several sideshow acts common in the nineteenth century which functioned as extreme cases of identities causing anxiety more generally in mainstream culture: for example, wild men who functioned as scapegoat stand-ins for Native and African-Americans, as well as hermaphrodites and bearded ladies who similarly stood in for transgender and homosexual people (see, for example, his discussion of the mutual influence of ideas surrounding miscegenation and "scientific" classification, 154).

symbolic and mythic connections to each other at the extreme margins of society, and to other marginal groups closer-to-center. Like Daphne's story and Harriet's, Fiedler's story of the little person lamenting the loss of his mythic dwarf status has stayed with me; even as I have interrogated it, it has helped to inform my work in this project. Gender, like size, is complex. Bodies and cultures cannot help but be mutually reflective and productive. When we ask, "nature or nurture?" we often fail to see that it is always nature (the body) being nurtured—nurture *entails* nature rather than standing in opposition to it, exclusive of it. Further, it is the language of nurture (or culture) which constructs our view of the body and the terms by which we understand it—nature entails nurture as well.

Transgender people—like their non-transgender counterparts—do not solve either/or debates about biology and environment; rather, like their non-transgender counterparts, they reinforce all the questions raised by that debate, and ultimately suggest that the binary is a false one. Sometimes bodies are more fluid than cultures; sometimes bodies are immobile masses which can force the stream of culture to move around them; sometimes bodies and cultures flow in the same stream; sometimes bodies and cultures impact one another head-on at high speeds. What this study seeks to explore, then, is the record in fiction of a cultural conversation about bodies and cultures.

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It has been said that spiritual awakening is not a destination but a road to be traveled. I believe that we are all spiritual beings and fellow travelers on that road. We are all on a journey that is spiritual as well as physical.

Sharing the stories of our journey is one way we can encourage each other along the road, because although our stories are different, there are common threads of human experience that make us more alike than not.

So I am here today to share some of the story of my journey, not because my story is remarkable or extraordinary, but because it is not. I hope that hearing about my journey will help you reflect on your own, and that you will leave here today more aware of our common humanity than of our differences.

When I was 18 years old, a doctor looked me in the eye and said, "Here are your choices: you can stop drinking or you can be dead in six months." At 18, my body had already been damaged by 10 years of alcoholism. Since the age of 8 I had been using alcohol to numb myself to the pain of growing up in an abusive family.

There are lucky children who are born into communities of people who nurture and affirm their awareness of what is sacred within them. The rest of us grab hold of anyone or anything that might help us to survive. I was fortunate to have a godmother who recognized a child in distress, even if she could not let herself know what was happening in my family. I held on to her, and to a teacher who told me, "I know whatever is in there must really hurt. I wish I could help. I wish you could talk to me about it." But I did not have any words for what I was experiencing. I even held on to a horse, who gave me a kind of love and acceptance, and did not ask me to explain when I cried against her neck. Finally, I grabbed hold of alcohol. Drinking allowed my spirit to survive, but it left me with permanent physical damage.

So now, at 18, the strategy that had helped to keep me alive was killing me. My choice was clear: to refuse treatment was to choose death. Yet my parents were opposed to me seeking treatment for alcoholism—on religious grounds, they said, though I suspect now that they were motivated by a fear that the family secrets would come out. In any case, I was told that if I stayed in rehab, I would be disowned by my family.

It was not an easy choice, as any misused child could tell you. Whatever I had suffered at the hands of these people, they were the only family I had. If I chose treatment, I would lose my family, security, the protection and status of belonging to a wealthy family, and the guarantee of a job in the family business.

I can look back on that moment and see that it was a turning point in my journey, a crucial fork in the road. I could go on living the lies of my family, or I could face the truth of who I was. I don't know where I found the courage to choose treatment. You might call it a human instinct for survival, or the call of the soul. What fits for me is to simply say that God was with me.

So, at 18, I was newly sober, homeless and jobless. I took minimum wage jobs—cleaning toilets, stocking shelves, washing animal cages. Somehow I managed to live, going to work, going to AA meetings, and counting every penny. This last part was new for me—the only financial hardship I had known before was once when I had to wait two weeks to get the 10 speed bicycle I wanted.

At this point in my journey, I met a fellow traveler who was a therapist. She recognized that emotionally I was a child in need of parenting, and she was able to give me the nurturing I had missed growing up. She helped me to find words for what I had experienced as a child. And she gently pushed me to acknowledge something else about myself: I was functionally illiterate. I had been able to hide this from everyone else, and I was not gracious about her finding me out. She

helped me to get past my shame, helped me to let go of the message I had been given that I was stupid. Many of our "therapy" sessions became reading lessons. Sometimes I think I owe my life to this woman. I know I owe her a great deal, and I cannot bring myself to call it LUCK that she came into my life when she did.

After a few years of working at minimum wage jobs, I managed to save a couple of thousand dollars. I took a book out of the library to learn how to invest this money and learned that real estate offered the highest rate of appreciation. So I bought a repossessed fixer-upper house, and read another book to learn how to install copper pipe, and then one on how to pour footings for a new porch, and so on. Being able to read opened up the world to me. I thought I could learn anything from a book.

With the encouragement of my therapist and my friends, I enrolled in a class at a community college-just to improve my reading, I thought. But then I took one more class, then another, then 2 classes at a time. Eventually, I found myself completing community college with top honors and applying to universities. I graduated from magna cum laude from LaSalle with a degree in Accounting. I have specialized in taxation and have had my work on subchapter S corporations published in a professional publication. I taught accounting, bookkeeping, and computerized accounting at a trade school. I started my own accounting practice and have recently expanded my office to write mortgages as well.

My professional accomplishments were part of a larger challenge, which was to come to terms with the truth about who I was. I had to own that, yes, I was an abused child, but I was not unlovable. And yes, I was an alcoholic, but I could stay sober. And yes, I was illiterate, but I was not stupid, as I had been told by my father. I'm not the smartest man in the world, and the more I learn the more I wish I knew. But it was an important part of my journey to discover that I am able to learn, that I was able to succeed at something, that I was able to survive apart from my family.

When I had reached this level of security and success in my professional life, the road led me to another fellow traveler who would be my greatest teacher. She came into my life suddenly, when she was only six months old. She taught me about joy and laughter, about giving and receiving love. I had never changed a diaper until the day my daughter arrived, and I am grateful to friends who helped me with the practical problems of parenting.

I was able to work out of my home that first year, celebrating her progress and mine with astonishment. I loved parenting. Something of my own lost childhood was restored to me by being a child with her. At night, after reading the three books she chose, I sometimes read the tax code to her and put us both to sleep. I loved her with a depth and passion I did not know I was capable of. We both thrived.

My daughter was 3 ½ when I lost her. It was the darkest period of my life. I was unable to work, unable to function, unable to remember why I should go on living. I felt stripped, naked, emotionally raw. And yet, curled into a fetal position, emitting primal sounds of grief-I felt the presence of God and knew I was not alone. Again, there were friends and professionals to protect and support me. The road led me to a house at the beach, a setting so therapeutic I am still trying to figure out how to write it off as a medical expense. Slowly, slowly, I learned to live with my loss. I can't say that I have recovered from it. Five years later, my arms still ache to hold her one more time.

Losing my daughter put many things in a new perspective for me. Getting stuck in traffic or having a business deal fall through are pretty minor incidents on the road of life compared to losing a child. Other things became MORE important: telling friends you love them, thanking someone for a kindness, celebrating each moment you have with loved ones.

Losing my daughter also made the pretenses of my life unbearable. It was time for me to face up to the rest of who I was. I spent many hours walking on the beach, having long conversations with myself and with God. And what I realized was that I was still living one lie,

and I could not go on. I had been born in a female body, but I knew in my heart, in my very bones, that I was a man. I had a good life and a successful practice living as a female. In a sense, I was hiding in the persona of a woman. But I knew that I could not continue to fool the world and betray my own knowledge of who I am. Choosing to live as a man would be choosing to live truthfully, transparently, revealed to the world as who I truly am.

I had known I was male for as long as I could remember. As a child, I thought the rest of the world would eventually realize their mistake and stop trying to make me a girl. I thought doctors would recognize the mistake and correct it like any other birth defect. As an adult, I was told that I was not a male but a lesbian, and I tried hard to accept this. But finally, after losing my daughter, there seemed to be no reason to pretend anymore.

The term for people like me is "transgendered." It is more common than you might think. Some transgendered people choose to express their true gender by cross-dressing occasionally, some manage to live their lives in their true gender without altering their bodies. Some, like me, choose surgery and/or hormone therapy to change their bodies to match their identities.

But it took a lot of walking on the beach to come to that choice. I worried about the expense, about the physical risk and pain of surgery. I worried about losing my practice. I worried about losing my friends. I worried about what people would say. I worried about losing the protective mask I hid behind. Finally, when I could be truly honest with myself--not only about who I was, but about what I had done, mistakes I had made, people I had hurt--then I was able to walk with a new, clear awareness of the presence of God in me and around me. And I was no longer afraid. I knew what I had to do.

Ultimately, it came down to this. The lie was costing me too much. At 18, I had chosen to reject the lie that I was a healthy member of a happy, functional family, when I was not. Then I chose to face the lie that I could read, when I could not. And I had spent my adult life systematically letting go of the lies I had been told about myself as a child. Now this most basic fact about who I am demanded to be acknowledged. I am a man, and I now had the opportunity to make my outsides match my insides. I had the opportunity to present myself to the world as who I truly am.

Walking on the beach, I came to a new understanding of my humanity: that I was only a grain of sand in the wide universe, that my struggles were insignificant from the cosmic view. And yet the choices I made were of the greatest importance, because the condition of the world is a product of the accumulated choices that all of us make.

Today I am legally a man. My name is Walter Wilson Boone-Moyer, a name I chose as a way of claiming my heritage as a man descended from men. One of those men was James Boone, my maternal grandfather, who was part Native American. He was one of our family secrets because it was a matter of shame that he was not "white". Taking his name is another way that I can refuse the lie, drop the pretense, and be who I am.

Some of the fears I had about transitioning were valid: I did lose some clients, and there were old friends who could not accept my decision. But to my surprise, my business increased by about 20% the first year. Since transitioning, I find that I am able to relate to people with an ease and freedom I never knew. A transgendered friend says it is like having the emotional elevator freed to go down to the basement instead of being stuck at the top two floors. Since transitioning, I find that my commitment to social justice is stronger, my desire to relieve others' suffering is more compelling.

Some of you may have trouble understanding how all of this is part of my spiritual journey. You may see my transition as a strictly physical process. For most of you, there has probably been no discordance between the gender you know yourself to be and the gender you are perceived by others to be. But imagine, if you are a woman, what it would be like to be perceived as a man, forced to go into the men's room, seeing things you would rather not see, knowing you

don't belong there. If you are a man, imagine being invited to women's activities, admitted to female confidences, knowing you are an interloper. That is the sense of fraudulence I had in my life. There is a heavy spiritual price to pay for living such a lie, even if it is forced on you.

I think that leading an authentic life, a transparent life, a life without pretense-is a challenge for any human being. All of us are pushed to be what someone else expects us to be. There is enormous pressure to hide our faults and pretend to fit into our family's dream for us or society's prescribed role for us. The first principle of Unitarian Universalism is to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. To do this for others, we must begin with ourselves. We must begin by knowing ourselves, with all our warts and blemishes, and affirming that even in the harshest light of self-knowledge, we are worthy.

Our UU pastor helped me to plan a rites of passage service to celebrate my transition. I invited people who had known me in many settings-church people, AA people, transgendered people, old and new friends. We planned a service that would give me courage through the surgeries I had ahead of me. But it became a time for people from different walks of life to celebrate their own journeys on the road to self-awareness and God-awareness. And I realized that it is really true that "no man is an island entire to himself." My rites of passage service was not about me, but about the transforming power of truth in all of our lives.

A UU minister once wrote, "We are joined together by a mystic oneness whose source we may never know, but whose reality we can never doubt. We are our neighbor's keeper, because that neighbor is but our larger self."

The third UU principle talks about encouraging one another's spiritual growth. To encourage means "to give courage" to someone or "to give heart" to someone, and I hope that something I have said this morning has done that for you. I hope you have been reflecting on your own path, on the turning points, on the teachers you have encountered along the way, on the moments when the presence of God broke through.

Thank you for honoring my story.

# Transgender

—Rev. Mary Katherine Morn

February 11, 2001

When I was a child there was a period of time—it may have been a day, or maybe it was longer—when I believed that little girls grew up to be men and little boys grew up to be women. It may have simply been a proposition I posed to my mother once. It might have been a trick my older brothers played on me. I don't know. But I remember believing it. Maybe it was a period when I was identifying heavily with my father. Maybe it was wishful thinking for a little girl discovering the barriers of her gender in a patriarchal culture.

I have always considered this a whimsical episode in my growing up. Until this week. It still feels a little whimsical—but there is something more that I see in it. Or feel in it. A little connection with people whom I have always considered radically different from myself. Maybe even a little identification with, at the very least some understanding of, people who are transgender.

Another thing from my childhood I just remembered, only this morning, is that I was starting second grade when the school district I was attending first allowed girls to wear pants to school. I was not living in a rural, isolated area, either. This came to me as I was thinking about what to wear this morning. I feel very fortunate to be able to wear these clothes (slacks, a jacket, and a bolo tie), which I enjoy, without fear of being fired, arrested, beaten up, or worse. I realize I take this right for granted. Remembering the restrictions placed on girl's dress as recently as my childhood puts this in some perspective. And as I say that, I realize that a boy in school today does not have the same freedom. Frankly, this is not something I've ever thought much about. Had it come to mind under other circumstances I believe I would have laughed it off. Why would anyone want to wear a dress? No, that's not right. I enjoy dresses. Why would anyone want to wear pantyhose?

Perhaps this sermon will be for you some of what it has been for me—a real education. Even a new language. We are not alone in this. Transgender people are themselves struggling with the words. This movement, as an organized entity, is so new that there is vast diversity in language used. It continues to evolve. I will do the best I can, with the understanding that I may not use language that satisfies everyone. This may be, itself, an important gift the movement for the rights of transgender people offers us: we should work to respect the language someone chooses to describe themselves.

So allow me to begin with a glossary of sorts. I am using material developed by the UUA for the Welcoming Congregation curricula. Though we are accredited as a welcoming congregation, that is a congregation that has worked to become more inclusive of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, when we went through the series of workshops on the subject (In 1994 and 1995) there was not much included about people who are transgender. The newly developed materials have been used now for several years and include a section specifically addressing the issues facing transgender people.

Transgender is an umbrella term used to include people who are transsexual, those who cross dress (some use the term transvestite), intersexual individuals, and people who see themselves as neither or both male and female gender, such as two spirit or third gender people. Most people prefer to use transgender without the "ed." So it would be a transgender person rather than transgendered. Transsexual is specifically a person born with a sex assignment that is not consistent with the self-understanding they have of their gender. Some people who are transsexual receive medical treatment to change their anatomical identification. Someone who is

intersexual is a person born with mixed sexual physiology. Intersexual individuals are often “assigned” a gender immediately after birth and surgically and hormonally altered to “correct” what many consider to be a problem. Two Spirit is a designation originating in native American communities. It is used for someone with ambiguous gender identification or someone who is gay or lesbian. Finally, a person is third gender whose understanding of his or her (!) gender identification transcends society’s polarized gender system. Transcending language may be the hardest barrier.

Transgender does not in any way indicate a particular sexual orientation. The solidarity, though, of people who are transgender, with people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual results from the relationship of the oppressions. Here is how trans activist Leslie Feinberg describes the relationship:

Gay, lesbians, and bisexuals are stigmatized and oppressed because they violate social standards for acceptable sex behavior; transsexuals because they violate standards for sex identity. Intersexuals are punished for violating social standards of acceptable sex anatomy. But our oppressions stem from the same source: rigid cultural definitions of sex categories, whether in terms of behavior, identity, or anatomy.

While gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have seen great gains in acceptance and rights over the last two decades, this has not been the case for people who are transgender. Even within the g/l/b/t community, many have been slow to offer understanding and compassion.

Our exposure, those of us who identify solidly with the sex of our birth, to transgender individuals has broadened in the last few years. Many of us felt the sting of our own tears as we watched the excruciating story of Brandon Teena in the movie *Boys Don’t Cry*. It is the story of the person born Teena Brandon who moved to a small town in the Midwest and lived as a boy despite possessing anatomical physiology of a girl. The story ends tragically with Brandon Teena’s gang rape and murder at 21.

I saw Hilary Swank’s acceptance speech for the Academy Award before I saw the movie. Her words of honor for Brandon Teena and other transgender people were brave and articulate. She expressed her hope when she said we’ve come a long way. And she encouraged people to do more than tolerate each other. She suggested we might even celebrate diversity.

In an interview after filming the movie a reporter asked Swank if Brandon Teena was transgender, or a lesbian who just hadn’t accepted the constraints that come in our society. Swank’s answer moved me. She said because Brandon Teena was killed at the age of 21, there hadn’t yet been an opportunity for self-declaration. That sentence took me a long time to write. Can you see why? “Swank said because Brandon Teena was killed at the age of 21, there hadn’t yet been an opportunity for self-declaration.” I managed to say that without a single pronoun. That challenge makes this sermon more difficult to write than many. I am making an effort to avoid the easy pronouns in cases where people’s experience of gender is not easy. Our words restrict our expression more than we know. No doubt they restrict our experience as well.

Leslie Feinberg, author and activist, writes about struggling with the two little boxes that appear on applications of all types. “M” or “F.” Two choices. Neither of which ever really worked. Feinberg suffered ridicule and oppression because of a very masculine appearance. Once, when looking for a job Feinberg attempted to use a feminine wig and jewelry to succeed. But it only made things worse. The next experiment involved fake sideburns. And was extremely successful. And was the beginning of Feinberg’s new life passing as a man.

Feinberg’s book, *Transgender Warriors*, is a fascinating look at the history of gender identification and oppression of individuals of ambiguous gender. The story of Joan of Arc is one of many that illumine a long history which includes reverence for individuals who cross gender boundaries. (The reverence Joan of Arc received from the masses did not translate well with the Church which tried her in the Inquisition. Perhaps it was the reverence she received from peasants

that was so threatening to them.) In the experience of Native people on this continent the two-spirit tradition seems to celebrate fluidity of gender, often honoring what some call two-spirit individuals with roles of importance in the community, often roles of religious leadership. Other traditions have had men passing as women serving as priestesses.

Feinberg reminds us that the Roman historian Plutarch described the Great Mother Goddess as hermaphroditic. This was to say the sexes had not yet been split, or divided. Fitting when you think about it. For an image of the divine to possess wholeness, to not be divided. Remember that in one of the creation stories in Genesis the Hebrew is translated: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Though the pronoun used here for God is confusing, many believe the message is that male and female together form the image of God that was intended.

What we learn about sex and gender is incredibly restricted by the social norms of the patriarchy which holds power still. Feinberg would add that colonialism and materialism contribute to gender oppression, as well as to many other types of oppression experienced today. These complex social rules come together in what appears to be a desperate attempt to force all of us into those two little boxes. As though any deviation from this would devastate the cultural foundation that supports us in communities and families. Perhaps you have experienced the sides of those little boxes closing in on you. Perhaps you have experienced the repercussions of a minor deviation from a gender norm. In most cases the punishment is swift and harsh. There are few of us, I believe, who have not crossed over, if only just a little bit, and discovered this for ourselves.

I read a beautiful sermon earlier this year by Unitarian Universalist minister Sean Parker Dennison. Sean's journey of transitioning from a woman to a man has all of the expected elements of alienation and fear and relief and joy. Haunted by the little boxes. These are Sean's words:

My life does not fit those boxes. My gender is not that simple. As hard as I have tried to choose one or the other, what is true for me is that I am both. It is more comfortable and more authentic for me to move through the world as a man. In my deepest knowing of myself, a male face, a male body, and a male identity feels true. When I think of myself or describe myself, it is as a man.

*At the same time, I lived thirty years of my life as a woman. I know how it is to be female in this society. I know how it is to be vulnerable to sexual assault, to be expected to be more nurturing than ambitious, to be a single mother struggling to make ends meet. I cannot simply discard that knowing or pretend those thirty years were a mistake. I cannot choose one side of myself over the other. To choose would be to willingly let some part of myself wither and die.*

Again, Sean is addressing an experience felt acutely by transgender people but often felt by others as well. Denying some part of who we are (whether gender related or not). Reducing ourselves to categories that others have defined. Letting pieces of ourselves die because they are not convenient. Transgender people offer us their courageous stories as reminders that integrity comes from a deep place in our spirits. Whenever possible, being true to ourselves is the compassionate, just thing to do. Not to mention affirming that which is true for others.

I always try to preach a sermon about love around Valentine's Day. After I scheduled this topic for this Sunday last summer I began to wonder how I would make that connection. This topic has touched some of my fears. I have caught myself falling into stereotyping and even questioning some people's behavior or appearance in the quiet places in my mind. But as this has happened I have noticed something else. Reading and hearing the voices of people who are transgender has truly opened my heart in ways I didn't expect. I feel a little bit of fear falling

away. I feel the beginning of more radical openness to others. I feel parts of myself coming back to life. As I open myself to the possibility of compassion and love for people who are different from me (and not so different), my own capacity to feel love and compassion for myself expands.

In one of the stories I read this week someone said, simply, “I have come to realize that I can be loved, not in spite of who I am, but because of who I am.” This is the journey for all of us. Loving ourselves and accepting love because of who we are. Loving each other not in spite of, but because of. This is the greatest love of all. Some call it God’s love. Some call it inherent worth and dignity. We could call it amazing grace.

I invite you today to use the alternate word in our closing hymn. Though sometimes it feels fitting to use the traditional “wretch like me,” in “Amazing Grace,” I would suggest that this morning we sing “Soul like me.” Let us set aside wretchedness for a moment at least, so that our hearts might be open to all souls.

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*Mary Katherine Morn was ordained to the UU ministry in 1987. She has served congregations in the south including Tyler, Texas and Macon, Georgia. She is currently the minister of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville, Tennessee. Mary Katherine shares life with her partner, John Rakestraw, and their son Caleb.*

# I Am What I Am

—Rev. Elizabeth McMaster

## Reading:

from *Love of Self* by Howard Thurman

“One of the great and critical problems of our time is that it is very difficult to find ourselves, for a person to find himself, to know where he is, who he is, what is he. And we think of love—when we think of it—in terms of feelings, thoughts, caring, all the words that you might use, for a not-self, for some other person, and we have so rearranged our inner sense of values that even we are loath to admit that we should love ourselves.”

“Now, I cannot love myself if I am anonymous to myself. If I have no idea about who I am, I cannot get close enough to me to love me. I spend my time trying to find me in the midst of the wide range of images of me that have been projected into me from my earliest childhood, by those who cared for me, who loved me, and who nurtured me. So that it is a very difficult and perilous route to locate me, to separate me from the self-images of me that are projected upon me from that time I am a baby. Images that reflect the love—sometimes. The images that reflect the self-rejection on the part of those whose responsibility it is to care for and nurture me. The image reflected upon me by my environment, so that wherever I look, I see thrown on the screen of my awareness a picture of me which, the assumption is, reflects not what is in the mind of the persons who cast the image before me, but a reflection of what I think I am.”

“So that before I can get to whatever may be ‘myself’ facts, I’ve got to work through all of these images. I am my mother’s boy, I am my father’s son. I am my sister’s brother. I am my aunt’s nephew. But, WHO ON EARTH AM I? WHO AM I? How may I draw a bead on me?”

## Sermon:

Howard Thurman, one of this century’s great theologians, asks the seminal question we hopefully ask of ourselves at sometime in our life, “Before I can get to whatever may be ‘myself’ facts, I’ve got to work through . . . images . . . WHO AM I? How may I draw a bead on me?” The answer to that question might begin with a simple statement: I am what I am! Acceptance of that statement for each of us is what’s not so simple.

Equal Partners in Faith, an interfaith organization devoted to equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, brings to the attention of many across the country how difficult it is to allow others to live the statement: I am what I am. Equal Partners wants all Americans to fully understand the unequal and unfair treatment of thousands of fellow citizens—based solely on their sexual orientation and gender identification. From time to time over the past several years, rallies and interfaith services have been promoting equal and fair rights for all citizens, and, at a rally in 1999, a Proclamation was read, stating:

*As committed people of faith representing diverse religions, creeds, nationalities, genders and sexual orientations, we join together to celebrate . . . “The Week of Equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People.” We join in solidarity with the hundreds of thousands who will celebrate Equality Begins At Home across the United States, a national campaign sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Federation of Statewide LGBT Political Organizations to strengthen and unite the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and allied communities.*

Tragically many LGBT people have repeatedly endured fear, suffering and even rejection by those in positions of power and leadership. As people of faith, we know too well the discrimination, homophobia and hatred that exist in our communities of faith leaving in their wake broken and hurting souls longing for a healing balm. We confess that our faith communities have betrayed the dignity and respect of LGBT persons and humbly ask for forgiveness.

“We further pledge that in our daily living beyond today, we will work relentlessly to foster an environment of growth, acceptance and full equality for LGBT persons wherever we may have cause and reason to speak. We solemnly recognize that we are to be held accountable for championing the rights and welfare of those who have been dismissed or marginalized by society. We pray that our united voices may begin the process of healing, offer hope to the disheartened and restore the broken trust in our communities. Because we hold to the belief that the Divine is the Sustaining Source of genuine love, we in return offer the richness of that love to all LGBT people in our homes, our communities and in our houses of worship.

Many LGBT people find love and acceptance in their faith communities. We applaud those people who have served as pioneers in our communities and lift up their efforts as a paradigm for the full equality of LGBT people. In joining with our fellow sisters and brothers celebrating Equality Begins at Home, we affirm that LGBT people are indeed created in the image of God, deserving of mutual love and respect. Our continued prayer is that one day intolerance, ignorance, bigotry and violence against all God’s children will be eradicated from the very places where compassion and peace should reign. Until that day we stand in one voice, one spirit, and one home for the full equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

Equal Partners in Faith “is a multi-racial network of religious leaders and people of faith committed to equality and diversity.” They say this about themselves, “Our diverse faith traditions and shared religious values lead us to affirm and defend the equality of all people, regardless of religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation. As people of faith, we actively oppose the manipulation on religion to promote exclusion and inequality.”

This morning I wish to speak on an aspect of gay rights that to date hasn’t been spoken about much in our Association or in our individual congregations, let alone the larger community. In 1998, at the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s meeting preceding General Assembly, I spoke to this issue, saying it was perhaps our next biggie. Someone later said that I was provocative, which I took to mean I was a rather large pain in the backside (He later explained to me that wasn’t what he meant by provocative—he said it made him think). Well, good! Beats being a large pain in the backside!

In the play *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman’s wife, Linda, pleads, “Attention must be paid!” Well, attention must be paid to a segment of the population we’ve tended either to make fun of or hide from sight. Attention must be paid toward the rights and equal treatment of transgender persons. Neither making fun of transgender people or hiding them from sight anymore will get this issue to disappear. The coming of age of oppressed minority populations that began over a century ago with the abolitionist and temperance movements has arrived, and no group of people anymore is going to sit by while their rights are denied and their lives are threatened.

“We covenant to promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” That’s our first Unitarian Universalist Principle. What do we mean—*really* mean—when we “covenant to promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person?” It means much

more than sticking a set of Purposes and Principles up on our walls and walking away. It means more than giving lip service to those words. It means we incorporate them into our every day actions; we live our Principles each day of our lives.

So let's look at one of the newest issues to hit our UU consciences—the issue of rights and equal treatment of transgender persons. First off, we need some definitions. We need to understand what we're talking about when we say “transgender.” If we use the word at all, we tend to group all transgender people into one big lump. All those folks we can't put a male or female handle on. Well, that's not accurate. There are various distinctions. So now to a vocabulary lesson.

Transgender is an umbrella term that covers several distinct groupings of people: transgender, transsexuals, intersexuals, and cross dressers.

Transgender people can be of any sexual orientation. That is, they may love whomever, of whatever gender, they are attracted to—the same as everyone else. Transgender does not refer to sexual orientation—whom do you love? Transgender refers to gender identification—what gender do you identify yourself with. Are you a man? Are you a woman? Are you both? Are you neither? What gets tricky about all this is that we as a culture **KNOW** that there are only two genders—you're either a man or you're a woman. There's no other choice. You have a check-off on nearly every piece of paper you sign. We've been so acculturated that we can hardly get our mind around anything other than the either/or of man/woman. You're either a man or a woman. So what's the problem? Check off one and let's move on!

But wait a minute. There are people in this world—indeed, “scientists and physicians say that between 1.7% and 4% of newborn babies are not “female” or “male.” One in fifty people is a combination of both sexes, or neither sex completely.” Whoa! This is starting to sound complicated. Stay with me!

Another definition. Transsexuals are people born into a body associated with one gender but believe internally they are another gender. They may be born in the body of a man, but believe themselves to be a woman, or born a woman, yet they believe themselves to be a man. The *cool speak* for this is “MtF” (male to female) or “FtM” (female to male). MtF's or FtM's may or may not undergo sexual reassignment surgery—that is, surgery that physically changes their gender construction. Or they may use hormones to help create the bodies they feel they were born to have. Or, they may simply do nothing to alter their bodies physically.

Next definition. Cross dressers are people who dress partially or completely in the clothing of the societal norm for the “opposite” gender. Historically, they have been called transvestites, but feedback from this segment of the transgender community is fairly consistent: they prefer calling themselves “cross dressers.” And notice that I said, “Cross dressers are people who dress partially or completely in the clothing of the societal norm for the ‘opposite’ gender.” I did not say they dress in clothing of the opposite sex, but the societal norm of dress. This is all part of our learning—to get away from this either/or kind of thinking. That men wear such and such; that women wear such and such. It's a cultural think-trick!

Well, we've all known about cross dressers for a long time. (Actually, I just discovered that the term “DrAG” queen—d-r-a-g—is the acronym for “dressed as a girl.” In recent years the musical Americans flocked to, “La Cage aux Folles,” which is the story of two gay men, one of whom is a cross dresser. I remember the first DrAG show I ever saw was in—well, where else—San Francisco. To give you an idea of how long ago that was, I had recently graduated from a small Midwestern college, and five of us took a trip across the country. Did we think we were hot stuff when we hit that show! What we thought about cross dressers or DrAG queens was probably something I would be ashamed to think now.

Two more definitions and then I'm done with dictionary-ing you. Intersexuals have bodies that deviate from absolute sexual dimorphism—they have, in some cases, ambiguous genitalia, or,

in others, a discord between the sex chromosome and the internal reproductive organs or external genitalia—their chromosomal makeup is at odds with their physical make-up. Often in the past and still today although a bit less frequently, doctors have performed surgery soon after birth to correct this “problem.” I say quote problem because intersexuality isn’t the problem; it’s society’s response to intersexuality that is. We simply don’t know how to address a birth that’s outside the norm of our acculturation and thinking. In many cases, the doctor who performs this surgery doesn’t tell the parents; they don’t have a clue that Harry has been “altered” to be Mary. Imagine parents who have thought all along that they gave birth to a girl—or a boy and then discover what the doc had done! Imagine growing up to find out this had been done to **you**!

The last definition: third gender people. These are people who understand their gender identification to transcend society’s binomial gender system—that is, they are uncomfortable with society’s definition of you’re either a man or a woman.

There’s a lot more vocabulary, but you’re smart enough for now. The problem is not defining our terms and differentiating among various groups of individuals who don’t meet the standards; the problem is that transgender people of whatever category have been treated for a long time as freaks or as people with mental disorders—and they continue to be misunderstood and discriminated against.

The American Psychiatric Association (you may remember how long it took this group we think of as professional to say that homosexuality was not a mental problem) describes the area of transgender as, “Gender Identity Disorder.” Does “Gender Identity Disorder” sound a trifle off the norm? When a professional organization such as the APA nails a group with the word “disorder,” we’ve got to understand that those people who fall into this category are going to be discriminated against big time—with the blessings of those we think know something. It gives free rein to individuals and groups who don’t like anything they consider off the norm to “have at it” —to badger, frighten, even kill—those whom they consider “abnormal.” And they are confirmed in their beliefs by professionals who term transgender people as being “disordered.” And we, who believe in the “inherent worth and dignity of every person” need to be vigilant in protecting those who would fall into this classification. Live out our principles.

Let’s view some root causes for the discrimination of transgender people. It’s far too easy to label people we don’t understand or who give us the heebie-jeebies because they’re “different” —way “different.” And it’s way easy for us to refer to arbitrary standards to excuse our discomfort with those we think are “off the norm.” We do it all the time. When a Black man dressed in a suit and tie is assumed to be the janitor of the Unitarian Universalist church he works in, we have fallen into the trap of “norm differentiation.” When a woman who acts pushy or assertive in a Unitarian Universalist board meeting, is assumed to be talking about something she knows nothing of and is undoubtedly a large pain in the backside, we have fallen into the trap of “norm differentiation.” We have this idea that women, Blacks, gays, older folks, whomever—ought to—should—behave in such and such ways. Frankly, we still do—even us liberal Unitarian Universalists!

And it throws us off balance when someone comes along who defies society’s carefully constructed distinctions. It’s part of our bifurcated culture that says something or someone is either/or. They’re either Black or they’re White. They’re either old or they’re young. Women are either dumb stay-at-homes (didn’t Hillary Clinton refer to them as cookie bakers?) or out doing something worthwhile in the world. Daycare workers could do something else if they were smarter—like Washington lawyers. And on and on. And in setting up this either/or state, we disallow people to be who they are as individuals—created uniquely—each and every one of us. It allows us to think or feel that women are dumb, Hispanics are lazy, Asians are crafty, people with handicaps are to be pitied, and gay people ought to just snap out of it! In the case of transgender people, what does this person standing in front of me, dressed in a dress with a bass voice, think

he/she/whoever is doing? How do I respond to this person? Good God, why can't he/she/whoever just be NORMAL??? And, out of our own discomfort, we wriggle away—in embarrassment and relief!

Transgender people are scary to us because they touch our deepest most innermost ideas about who we are as human beings. A woman I know who has been an articulate voice for equality for gay men and lesbians for decades tells me she has trouble with the whole issue of transgender because she has never wanted to be anything else but who she is—a woman. “But,” I respond, “that’s beside the point. You’ve never been a lesbian, but you are able to speak out for lesbian rights.” But this, she says—and I understand her quandary—goes so much deeper and it’s so much more difficult to get a handle on. It’s because we’ve been socialized since birth to think of ourselves as—well, as who we’re told we are. You’re a man. I’m a woman. And that’s that.

Then along come some people who say, “No, that’s not that!” And they begin to tell us their stories. Stories about knowing since they were little that something wasn’t quite ok with them—something didn’t fit. They were called “girl” but that’s not how they felt. They were treated like “boy” but it wasn’t right. If they, boys who felt girl-like, dressed up in Mommy’s dresses, they were scolded. They were taught that that wasn’t the way they were supposed to be. If they dressed in pants and wanted to appear male-like, they were chastised and put in dresses and frilly clothing. I know of a child, born ostensibly male, who loves ballet, whose hair reaches his waist, who’s slight of frame. His mother, blessings on her, treats him as he wants to be treated. The community shows, directly and indirectly, their censure by asking, albeit obliquely, why she doesn’t cut his hair and make him “shape up.” Here’s a with-it mother! But what are they, mother and son, to do?

So what is anyone to do in these situations? Transgender persons are going through a lot of hell—they have, at least in Western culture, gone through a lot of hell forever. Some of them have trouble getting jobs. Some may not be able to get a place to rent. Forget insurance. And so sometimes they’re broke, sometimes homeless, uninsured. If they want to have sexual reassignment surgery, it’s expensive and it’s difficult to even get a doctor to operate. Hormones can help in some ways but not in others. I don’t want you to think all transgender people are poor or homeless or uninsured. Some are not. But many are. And many are because society simply can’t handle this. Over and above it all, there’s a society that says, “You don’t fit our norm. We can’t deal with you.” It’s all part of our societal codes that say you’re either one thing or you’re another. Either/or.

Now let’s take a look at our own attitudes and line them up with our Purposes and Principles. And in the doing, can we not see that any time we discriminate against anyone and any time we allow crude jokes or bigoted actions on the part of others to occur, we have betrayed our own selves. We have acted in ways that are not consistent with what we say we stand for. Instead, is it possible for us to be leaders in building a society that cherishes each one of us for what we are—a unique, one-of-a-kind specimen of homo sapiens? And, if that were possible, might we then be able to build a world of peace where diversity is truly celebrated? Where our differences would lift up each one of us as special?

In our reading this morning, Howard Thurman says, “I cannot love myself if I am anonymous to myself.” That’s getting down to basics! We first must understand ourselves, know ourselves if we are to cherish others. And we need to stop looking at us and our world in either/or ways. Very few things in life are either/or. There are shades of everything human. That’s, after all, what gives us our uniqueness—each one of us is a combination of lots of things—race and gender. Our examination of our own sense of who we are may lead to some pretty interesting findings. Hopefully, we come out of that examination more loving toward ourselves for who we are and more respectful of others for who they are.

Again, Howard Thurman, “This body of mine is the only dwelling place of my mind and my spirit. I have no other dwelling place. And if I so disown my organism because I am ashamed of it or because it’s broken or because it is ugly or unsightly, there is no other place for me. So with all my limitations, with all my inadequacies, with all the things about me that are unsightly and unseemly, this is it. And anyone who wishes to destroy me, all he has to do is to make me hate me. So that I’m ashamed of me and I’m a wanderer in the vast spaces of an empty universe. No home, nowhere.”

I am what I am. Neither all good nor all bad. Neither all right nor all wrong. Simply me. And I need to celebrate myself and celebrate all humanity—and I hope you need to, too. So, I invite you to join with all of us in responding to the “Litany of Wholeness” found in your Order of Service.

### **Litany of Wholeness:**

Let us hold all people in our hearts. For people who are blind and cannot see and for those who can see but are blind to people around them.

*Help us to touch each other with kindness.*

For people who move slowly because they have to, and for those who move too fast to be aware of the world in which they live.

*Help us to be aware of each other.*

For people who are deaf and cannot hear, and for those who can hear but would ignore the cries of others.

*Help us to respond to each other.*

For people who learn slowly, for people who learn in different ways and for people who learn quickly and easily but often choose ignorance.

*Help us to grow in wisdom together*

For people who see themselves as different from others and for people who live in unholy fear of being different from others.

*Help us to learn to heal ourselves.*

For families and friends who support transgender people and for those who feel awkward in their presence.

*Help us to be comfortable with each other.*

For people who think they are worthless and beyond love and for people who think they don’t need love.

*Help us to give and receive love.*

For people who feel isolated and for people who contribute to that sense of isolation.

*Help us to change our hearts.*

For all people, that we may learn to respect each other and accept each other and live together in peace.

Amen

# Choose Life

—Rev. Mary J. Harrington  
June 29, 1997

## Opening Words:

*From Nelson Mandela's Inaugural Address*

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

## Reading:

*From the Torah, Deuteronomy 30:11-16*

*Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.*

*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you follow the path of righteous living by loving the Creator, walking in the ways of goodness and peace, and keeping faith with each other, you will be blessed in the land that you are entering. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray, you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness to you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

## Sermon:

Good morning. So here's what happens when the ambitious, enthusiastic chairperson of the service auction approaches a minister and implores her to agree to auction off a sermon topic. The minister may have grave misgivings along the lines of being bought, as in, how could you possibly put a price on worship and the creative process? As in, what if no one bids on your auction contribution, or it goes for \$10.95? In this story, though, the minister consents, since she is also a longtime and long-suffering fundraiser and recognizing a kindred spirit in the auction chair, is naturally - if not downright insanelly - sympathetic. Come auction night, said chair herself offers the highest bid and buys the privilege of telling the minister what to speak about.

In our tradition of the free pulpit, this is a rare experience indeed, to work with an assigned theme. But that's not all to this story. Because then, the high bidder, in this case, Fellowship member Jan Ogren, sits you down and fills you in on what she has in mind, to wit:

Jan is a remarkably talented and experienced psychotherapist, who has specialized in understanding the relationship between mind and body. This is a simplistic description of her field of expertise, but she cares passionately about physical as well as mental and emotional health, and how these are utterly, inextricably interrelated. She pointed out to me that, generally speaking, all other mammals seem programmed to eat what is healthy for them, to sleep when tired, to nurture and protect their offspring, to act in ways that promote and preserve survival and health.

Why, she wanted me to explain, not human beings? Why don't we, especially given that we know so much, even when we've had the benefits of education and therapy, why don't we more easily, naturally, automatically, consistently make choices that lead us towards health? Why, when we know better, do we smoke, drink, misuse drugs, overeat, eat junk food, and lead frantic lives? Why do we do so many things that cause us to impair our well being, hurt our bodies, harm others, and degrade not only our own quality of life, but also the whole planet's?

And, as if this weren't a tall enough order for this sermon, she added that she had already been exploring this question through psychology, sociology and science. So would I please leave these approaches aside and focus on the theological dimension, namely, how might religion address this question, or perhaps, to put it another way, could there be a spirituality of health?

Having a certain instinct for survival myself, I had to fight off the temptation to personally refund Jan's donation. Then, I wondered if a Zen response might suffice, along the lines of less is more, a question to answer the question, something spare and simple, like: How the heck would I know?

Or in koan form:

*Knowing the answer, the bird stirs in the plum tree.*

*Not knowing the answer, the owl flies toward the moon.*

(I wrote that myself.)

I can almost picture Jan sitting with clients in her office, week after week, working so hard to help them come to deeper self-understanding, to help them to feel happier, to help them sort out their difficulties and identify options. And yet. And yet. Often it does seem to be the case that no matter how much insight we may acquire, no matter how hard we try to change, we keep on repeating our mistakes, we continue to manifest our shortcomings, we sometimes even manage to "fix" one of them, only to take on another.

This could be enough to fill the most intrepid, tireless therapist with despair. Or I think of my preaching professor at Starr King School, Ron Cook. As a young graduate of seminary, Ron lasted in the parish about three years. This actually is fairly common in our denomination. Our former director of the Department of Ministry determined that a high percentage of our ministers - maybe as many as 40% - leave the parish after their first 3 to 5 years. I'm sure there are lots of reasons for this disillusionment, but I will never forget Ron's.

Week after week, he got up and talked about what matters in life. He worked hard at this vocation of preaching the word, and he offered inspiration, hope, truth, and wisdom. I have no doubt of this, given all that I learned from him. Yet he had to wonder, why bother? The people continued to get divorced, to abuse their bodies, to screw things up, to suffer. Almost every problem they had, he offered some sage words that if heeded could have - should have - made a difference. But it didn't seem to matter; he could find little correlation between his sermons and the well being of the members of his congregation. He went on to become a remarkable, beloved teacher of ministers, but this dynamic of being human, this question of Jan's, haunted him to his retirement.

Since other animals seem to have an instinctive, effortless pull towards what is good for them, why not us humans? Many disciplines have explored this question, which is tied to understanding our essential nature, why we are how we are. Legends and myths too have tried to unlock the mysteries of what makes us tick. In the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, a precious and

lovely princess is at last born to parents who have longed for a child. In their great joy, they invite everyone in the land and the 12 neighborhood fairies to celebrate with them. Each fairy in turn is asked to bless the new life with a special quality or attribute, and so they do, until it seems that the princess will surely have a life that is overflowing with goodness, happiness and abundance.

At the last minute, just before the 12th fairy has offered her blessing, in comes the 13th fairy, the one whom the king and queen either forgot about, in some versions of the tale, or had avoided out of fear, according to other versions, because of her wickedness. Whether the 13th “left out” fairy flies into a rage because she was slighted or because she is essentially evil, she puts a curse on the newborn. “When she is 16, she will prick her finger on a spinning wheel and die.” No amount of weeping, begging, pleading or threatening from the parents and guests will persuade her to withdraw the curse. In the end, the 12th fairy, as much as she would have it otherwise, does not have enough power to fully counteract the curse.

Like a therapist or a minister, perhaps, she can only soften the anguish and the now inherent flaw by rearranging things a bit, changing a fate of youthful death to a deep sleep with a happy ending a hundred years later. But how happy could she really be, I wondered as a child, to wake up in the arms of a stranger, and with her whole known family already dead and gone, in a time warp.

In the cosmology of Sleeping Beauty, the source of the princess’ defect does not come from within her, like the concept of original sin, nor was it caused by her parents, by the way they raised her, as much of modern psychology would suggest. It could be called bad luck, or fate, arising from some deep and mythic understanding that perfection is impossible and that some form of this curse, this terrible gift, is visited on each and every one of us.

“I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity,” says the greatest of prophets. We have a choice, we humans, to move in the direction of health and wholeness, but the choice doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It comes with a formidable challenge; in biblical language, a commandment: “Follow the path of righteous living by loving your Creator, walking in the ways of goodness and peace, and keeping faith with one another.” By living in right relationship with each other, our world, and ourselves we are by definition choosing life. When we violate this commandment to walk in the ways of justice and mercy, we are choosing “not life,” we are choosing instead adversity and death. Here is where choosing makes a difference.

Yet very, very often, people who are as innocent as the princess known as Sleeping Beauty are overcome in their lives by the forces of death and destruction. Choosing life comes with no guarantees of anything, as we know all too well. Again and again in the Hebrew bible, God reaches out to the people and the people strive to live by ethical principles and treat each other well and offer untold gratitude for all the gifts of life, only to be pursued, persecuted, and slaughtered.

Even if all of Jan’s clients and all of Ron’s parishioners listened well and worked hard and cared for themselves and other people with all of their strength and their determination, still, even then, wouldn’t terrible things happen to some of them anyway, and difficult things befall all of them, sooner or later? Why bother? Why not eat too much or keep drinking or have one more smoke? There really were signs in the latrines at Auschwitz that read, “Smoking is hazardous to your health.” But this cruel, cruel irony, and scores of other atrocities, have not stopped certain of our fellow human beings, back from the mouth of hell, from shaking us awake, and touching us and reminding us as no others can, of the inherent worth and meaning and preciousness of life.

We must choose life because every time we do, Nelson Mandela says, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same. As we are liberated, our presence automatically liberates others. I think of our own member, Elizabeth Cecil. Elizabeth is at the Pride Parade in San Francisco today, but she gave me her blessing and her permission to mention her here. When Elizabeth was born she was named Cecil, apparently male. Recently she came out to us as a

transgender person. She has changed her name and her hormones, her hair and her clothing, and her gender status. She wanted to choose life, she wanted to be whole, but this wasn't possible for her before - there was too much confusion, secrecy, shame and fear. Now she feels she can be fully who she is, here in this congregation.

I know there are people who can only see this as bizarre and find themselves full of disapproval and even revulsion. But there are all kinds of hell that we will never experience personally, thank god, and we only need to take Elizabeth's word for it, that for most of her life she was trapped in an identity that was not hers, and now she has come to find herself released from a biological and social nightmare, able at last to affirm herself and be affirmed. Her courage and liberation can add to our own, if we let it in. If we choose it. I really think that the presence of Elizabeth in this community and the acceptance she has found here is a case of life choosing us.

We can improve the odds on choosing life and opening the way for life to choose us, through practices which are life-affirming: telling the truth about who we are, caring well for our bodies, simple living, saying yes and saying no, forgiving ourselves and each other, resting, praying or meditating, singing. We can practice all of these as individuals, and even more essential, we can practice all of them in community.

Just the other day, a member here, one of our wise elders, said to me, "I can't return to the religion of my childhood because it's too full of silliness for me. But I am so glad to be a Unitarian Universalist because it makes sense to me; it's a good fit for whom I am. And it has brought me into relationship with this congregation, which is very important, because I don't think you can have real wisdom except in a community."

When despair for the world grows in us, or despair of each other, and ourselves we can seek the peace of wild things and find rest and solace in nature, and we can also come into the care of community. It would be hard *not* to choose life in a beautiful place, and it would be hard for life not to find and choose *us* with and through each other's example, perspective and love.

Of course I could not deliver my last sermon here without a Mary Oliver poem. This is from her newest book, West Wind. It is about risk, about challenge, most certainly about choosing health and wholeness, whatever the cost. From ancient prophet to modern poet, the commandment is one and the same.

From the poem entitled *West Wind*, by Mary Oliver:

*You are young. So you know everything. You leap into the boat and begin rowing. But, listen to me. Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me. Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and your heart, and heart's little intelligence, and listen to me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile way and still out of sight, the churn of the water as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the sharp rocks - when you hear that unmistakable pounding - when you feel the mist on your mouth and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls plunging and steaming - then row, row for your life toward it.*

"Listen to me," the poet says. "I talk directly to your soul." "Surely," says the prophet, "this commandment is not too hard for you, nor too far away. No, it is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to follow."

"When you feel the mist on your mouth and hear that unmistakable pounding, row toward it." The poet addresses you the person, the prophet, you the community, but the charge is the same. Don't turn away from life or from love, don't turn away from yourselves or each other. When you are filled with doubt or despair, even so, move towards love, no matter how terrifying

or uncertain. A life without love is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied. But love, even when things are unpredictable and transitory, even when you know you cannot hold onto something forever or make it stay the same, is worth the risk.

Thank you for opening your lives and hearts to me over all of these months that we have shared together. Thank you for taking a chance on love. It's wonderful knowing that you and the Keips will be in each other's good hands. Ultimately, we don't have to work so very hard on choosing life. If we stay faithful to one another, life will find us and keep us.

*Knowing the answer, the people lift their oars and listen.  
Not knowing the answer, the people row toward  
the unmistakable pounding.*

# Pastoral Care with Transgender People

—Sarah Ivy Gibb

Pastors are community caregivers. True community care must be based in an understanding of one's own community. Within every religious community of every religious faith, there are transgender people. It may not be evident to the pastor; fear and shame keep many silent. Transgender identities may be visible or invisible within a congregation, but they are there just the same. We are called in communities of faith to serve all God's children. We are called to seek justice, to work for radical inclusiveness. This kind of work calls us and challenges us to stand with the oppressed, to examine oppressive structures, and to always remain open to learning and reflection on the journey. Pastors are called, in the spirit of Jesus, to confront the life-denying fallacies of our culture that serve the powerful and punish the powerless.

We learn from this dominant culture that people come in two biological sexes, male and female, and that this biology naturally corresponds with two genders, man and woman. Males express themselves as men, females as women, we are taught. But the reality of transgender people's lives stands as a testament against the universality of male and female, and a system that upholds this universality is, ultimately, life-denying.

The goals of this analysis of transgender pastoral care are threefold: to familiarize pastors with characteristics of transgender people and communities, to address and critique the prevalent models of pastoral care that transgender people experience, and to apply Donald M. Chinula's four tasks of pastoral care to construct a healing and liberatory model of pastoral care with transgender people.

Transgender is an umbrella term, encompassing multiple modes of gender identity and expression. The Unitarian Universalist Association Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns identifies four communities within the transgender movement: crossdressers, transsexuals, third gender people, and intersexuals.<sup>1</sup> The definitions within these communities continue to evolve as the diverse transgender community grows in awareness and visibility. Because of the evolving definitions and people's own evolving self-knowledge, it's important as a pastor to respect and accept the self-definition of each transgender person, whether that definition fits within the following categories or not.

Crossdressers, also known as transvestites, dress in the clothing style of the "opposite" gender, either fully or partially, for pleasure, relaxation, or entertainment purposes. The majority of crossdressers are heterosexual men who do so in secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

Transsexuals are, generally, people whose internally-felt gender is different from the gender typically associated with their biological sex of birth. For example, a female-to-male transsexual person can be born in the body of a female and identify as male. Transsexual identity may or may not cause one to seek out sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). Some transsexual people undergo hormone treatment or plastic surgery either in conjunction with, or separate from, SRS.

Third gender people understand their gender transcends the categories "male" and "female"—their identity lies beyond these categories. Third gender people often prefer the term "transgender" to "third gender."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Greve, Barb and Keith Kron, *Transgender 102* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000) 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

Intersexuals are people whose biological sex at birth transcends the categories “male” and “female.” Their genitalia are considered “ambiguous” by medical professionals and/or they have some female and some male reproductive organs. Intersexuals have historically been known as “hermaphrodites.” Often medical professionals and parents elect to perform surgery on intersexual newborns to “assign” them a female or male sex.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a new spirit of community building, organizing, and activism among transgender people. Although transgender organizations exist across America, a transgender individual may or may not be connected with a supportive organization of others that share that individual’s self-definition. In fact, because of fear and shame, many transgender people remain in the closet.

The people and sub-communities that comprise the transgender umbrella share some issues with the lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Some people who identify as transgender also identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, so the separation is not that clear cut. Other transgender people identify as heterosexual. Gender identity and sexual orientation are two separate continua—contrary to popular assumption, transgender identity does not always resolve in heterosexuality. For example, a male to female transsexual can be happily married to a woman both before and after SRS. People don’t “change their sex” to become heterosexual, they change it to become outwardly who they are internally.

Transgender people share some oppressions with gay, bisexual, and lesbian people, and that is why they often work in conjunction for recognition and rights. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are stigmatized and oppressed because they violate social standards for acceptable sex behavior; transsexuals are stigmatized and oppressed because they violate standards for sex identity. Intersexuals are punished for violating social standards of acceptable sex anatomy. But our oppressions stem from the same source: rigid cultural definitions of sex categories, whether in terms of behavior, identity, or anatomy.<sup>4</sup>

While transgender, bisexual, lesbian, and gay people also share threats of physical violence, verbal abuse, harassment, and rejection by family and faith community, there are some oppressions that transgender people face in a significantly different way. Transgender people face enormous barriers to even the most basic health care. Harassment, misunderstanding, and even refusal of care by health care workers are all too common.

I remember late one night in December my lover and I arrived at a hospital emergency room during a snowstorm. My fever was 104 degrees and rising. My blood pressure was pounding dangerously high. ...The doctor in charge began physically examining me. When he determined that my anatomy was female, he flashed me a mean-spirited smirk. ...He told me to get dressed and then he stormed out of the room. ...The doctor returned after I was dressed. He ordered me to leave the hospital and never return.<sup>5</sup>

Transgender people face the stress of living in a world that denies and punishes their existence. Leslie Feinberg describes the dilemma posed by the checkboxes “F” and “M” on forms:

Because it is legally mandated that all our lives must fit into one of those two tiny boxes, many of us actually face imprisonment or institutionalization merely because we don’t. We live under the constant threat of horrifying violence. We have to worry about what bathroom to use when our bladders are aching. We are forced to consider whether we’ll be

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<sup>4</sup> Feinberg, Leslie, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998) 93.

<sup>5</sup> Feinberg 2

dragged out of a bathroom and arrested or face a fistfight while our bladders are still aching. It's an everyday reality for us. Human beings must use toilets.<sup>6</sup>

Marginalization and denial do not only come from the straight, non-transgender community: they also come from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and allied people and organizations. Existing within a power structure that punishes difference in sexual orientation and identity, organizations working to promote gay rights have often sought to downplay or ignore variances in gender within the community, seeking to focus on presenting the most “palatable” face to a homophobic and transphobic nation. In the past ten years the transgender community has come to be mentioned in the movement by name (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender, or GLBT, has become common parlance) but rarely in spirit. Transgender speakers and organizations were all but invisible at the 2000 Millennium March on Washington.

It is important to remember that transgender oppression does not exist in isolation. The nature of the oppression differs for individuals and communities and is interlaced with many factors, including geography, class, religion, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Transgender oppression's lived reality cannot be separated from the homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism that also play out in the daily lives of transgender people.

Transgender people who are attracted to people of their same biological (or in the case of intersexuals, assigned) sex often come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual before coming out as transgender. In this way identification as a bisexual, gay, or lesbian person can serve as a means to, and not an end of, acceptance and self-definition. Sometimes when a previously identified gay or lesbian person comes out as transsexual they no longer identify as gay or lesbian; they identify as transsexual and straight.

In researching for this paper, I learned that very little has been published specifically on pastoral care with transgender people. I attribute this primarily to the lack of awareness about transgender people among pastoral caregivers. Of the ministers engaging in pastoral care with openly-transgender people, various degrees of knowledge and acceptance are demonstrated, from absolute intolerance and denial to confident affirmation and empowerment.

The model that best describes the pastoral care of transgender people is Margaret Kornfeld's “gardener.”<sup>7</sup> The gardener's twofold task is to tend to the ground (the community) and to the plants in the ground (the people). The gardener's job is not to make the plants grow (God does that) but to nurture them into healthy growth. In the pastoral care of transgender people, Kornfeld's description of positive and nurturing gardener fits to an extent. But gardeners, in general, are only positive and nurturing to the plants they think are supposed to grow in their garden. Gardeners *weed*. Transgender plants, not mentioned in any gardening guide the gardeners have ever seen, don't fit in with their rows of pink and blue petunias. Gardeners don't know what to do with them. Briana Greene describes the experience of seeking pastoral care from such well-intentioned gardeners—chaplains at a Southern Baptist college:

...[T]hese Southern Baptists loved me. They convinced me that God loved me too, and that the only reason I was questioning my gender and my sexual orientation was because I had been abused. For four years, they tried to convert me to the doctrine of heterosexuality, but no matter how much they loved me, it never quite took. I guess someone forgot to mention to them that GLBT people are born and not made.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Feinberg 68.

<sup>7</sup> Kornfeld, Margaret, *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 10.

<sup>8</sup> Briana Greene, homily, National Coming Out Day worship service, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, 13 Oct. 2000.

A second kind of gardener recognizes, indeed, that transgender people are “born and not made.” These gardeners cultivate the ground, the community, to help every plant in their garden thrive. And if the soil doesn’t have the right composition for a transgender plant, the gardener adds compost, mulch, and water. This gardener appreciates the uniqueness and integrity of each plant, valuing the abundance of life above some pre-ordained vision of garden design. Barb Greve has had affirming experiences with his ministers in the church he has attended all his life:

As I have gone through my own coming out journey and shared it with my ministers, some of the most powerful things, particularly in this last phase of pronoun switching and my expressing myself more outwardly, have been my ministers’ understanding that this is part of a journey and their acknowledgment that they’re honored to share pieces of it with me. Their recognition that this isn’t just “something that I’m doing,” but rather that this is a serious matter, and something that we’re sharing together, has been incredibly pastorally positive.<sup>9</sup>

Both variations of the gardener model have drawbacks as well as advantages for work with transgender people. The rigid gardener model, though often well intentioned, is harmful, for it denies the identity and the very life of transgender people. A pastoral caregiver can easily fall into the trap of trying to help a transgender person conform to the gender that society believes fits them. But in so doing, the caregiver denies the courage, the reality, and the life-seeking impulses of the transgender community member. The more accepting, nurturing gardener model has many advantages, in that it provides holistic, attentive care that honors the dignity of the transgender. It also involves work with the community to help the transgender member thrive within it. A limitation of this model is that the caregiver, while respecting the transgender person, may still not understand the person (since transgender people are rarely, if ever, mentioned in pastoral care guides) and may come to regard this person as an exotic novelty, thus furthering the transgender objectification and “thingifying” the person.

A final limitation of the gardener model is that it doesn’t acknowledge the immense growth that a pastoral caregiver can experience by working with and learning from transgender people. United Methodist clergywoman Maurine Waun describes a moment when visiting a male to female transgender parishioner in the hospital. The nurse has just brought in a male urinal.

In the course of my ministry over the previous several years I had stood up for Larry, marched in the Pride Parade, stuck my neck out with colleagues and church people and learned to be particularly sensitive to people’s issues, but never did I feel a deeper act of compassion for someone’s most private and personal secret than I did with Dawn in that split second.<sup>10</sup>

The pastor learned and grew from the encounter, deepening her understanding and resolve.

In *Building King’s Beloved Community*, Donald M. Chinula presents a model for pastoral care that counters the “thingifying” effects of oppression. He identifies four tasks for pastoral caregiving based on Martin Luther King Jr.’s constructive thought: reclamation, conciliation, transformation, and transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Barb Greve, personal interview, 18 Oct. 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Waun, Maurine C. *More than Welcome: Learning to Embrace Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Persons in the Church*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999). 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> Chinula, Donald M. *Building King’s Beloved Community: Foundations for Pastoral Care and Counseling with the Oppressed*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997) 56.

The goal of reclamation is the healing of the diminished self-esteem and the fractured self-concept of the self, both direct results of systemic oppression. Central to this healing, for Chinula, is the revelation that we are all created in God's image. This particular revelation is tricky for transgender people, as the very text from which it is drawn, Genesis 1:27, has been invoked to deny transgender people's legitimacy. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (NRSV). Oddly, this text has also been used to deny *intersexual* people's legitimacy, justifying plastic surgery on newborns with "mixed" genitalia as if their genitalia were created by anyone but God.<sup>12</sup>

The key to unlocking this text and using it for liberation rather than subjugation lies in both debunking the assumptions behind oppressive interpretations and reconstructing an image of God. Helping to demonstrate how this God-ordained "naturalness" of the social norm was human-created, not God-created, is a first step in liberating God from oppressive interpretation. But in re-imaging lies the more powerful message. God, in whose image both male and female are made, is beyond gender or comprises aspects of female and male. God, in this sense, *is transgender*. Imaging God as transgender is both biblically accurate and theologically sound. People who are transgender are, then, created in God's image, just as much as non-transgender males and females.

A great potential ally for pastoral caregivers in the healing of the fractured self-concept and diminished self-esteem of transgender people is professional therapy. Therapy, for those transgender people who can afford it, can be profoundly helpful in the courageous journey to healing and self acceptance. The presence or absence of professional therapy in the life of a transgender person can influence the type of pastoral care a caregiver is called upon for:

We see pastors on a short-term basis, either a flare-up in our lives or some major personal crisis. Be it good or bad we turn to religion, to pastors, at these times. Therapists are more of a long-term help to fix life problems that a transgender identity compounds. In a therapeutic setting, there's more time to struggle through the trans identity, both as a personal issue and as a relationship issue. On the pastoral care side, we don't have time to deal with that. The pastoral care setting is not about the identity, it's about whatever's going on in life, but because all of our identities impact everything in our lives, transgender identity is part of the equation.<sup>13</sup>

As pastoral caregivers it is also important to recognize that, by nature of beginning the coming out process, or by nature of requesting pastoral care, transgender-identified people are already on the path to healing self-concept and self-esteem. The burden is not on the caregiver to initiate this process—it becomes the caregiver's job to help it along.

Connection with transgender support and liberation movements is another valuable step toward healing. The experience of meeting other people with similar gender identities is deeply affirming. A feeling of isolation transforms into a feeling of inclusion. "We need each other. We each know what it's like to fight back alone. We need each other's strength as allies. And we know what it's like to feel like the only one who's different. When 'difference' suddenly comes into focus as diversity it's a healing experience."<sup>14</sup> Pastoral caregivers can help connect isolated transgender people with resources for peer support.

The second task Chinula identifies is "conciliation." Conciliation aims to reach out to the opponent and secure a friendship. It goes beyond patching up a broken relationship; it involves transcending anger, however justified, to reach out in love. King exemplified conciliation in his

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<sup>12</sup> Gross, Sally, "Intersexuality and Scripture." [http://www.sonic.net/~cisae/IS\\_and\\_scripture.html](http://www.sonic.net/~cisae/IS_and_scripture.html) (23 Oct. 2000) 1.

<sup>13</sup> Barb Greve, personal interview, 18 Oct. 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Feinberg, 55.

persistent, loving, non-violent activism. Conciliation, for the transgender, is very difficult, as it is with all oppressed groups, due to the vast and personal nature of “the opponent.” If the opponents are those who denied your humanity, your integrity, your reality, then one must reach out in conciliation to nearly every cultural institution: the government, religion, the media, schools, the English language, as well as those who have, however unwittingly, caused or enabled transgender suffering: family, friends, abusers, harassers, perfect strangers. The opponent in this case can seem very overwhelming. But perhaps the opponent is a philosophy, or a dogma, that drives the oppression, and causes people to act as they do: a bi-gendered worldview, sexism, or heterosexism. Relocation of the opponent from “everyone” to a philosophy can open up doors for conciliation. It’s not that people are all bad, it’s that we’ve all been inculcated with a poisonous philosophy. The philosophy can be unlearned.

It is no small task to reach out to the opponent in friendship. It is, ultimately, a spiritual task that takes great courage. But it is necessary for survival. Conciliation, rather than the sublimation of anger, can be viewed as an outcome of truly recognizing and addressing one’s anger. While fully acknowledging this anger, one can choose to reach out in conciliation, not for the benefit of the opponent, but for one’s own benefit. Anger, especially anger at such formidable opponents as the transgender have, can be all consuming if one lets it get to that point. Conciliation, making peace, securing friendship can both create peace *and* advance the causes one is fighting for. Conciliation does not end the struggle for recognition, respect, and rights. Just the opposite—conciliation counters despair, conciliation fuels hope, conciliation empowers work for justice. Conciliation fuels the next of Chinula’s steps, “transformation.”

Transformation, in Chinula’s definition, is two-fold: it involves transformation of the self and transformation of society. The vocation of pastor is uniquely equipped to foster both. Central to self-transformation, for Chinula, is understanding of history. Moving from object of history to subject of history is essential in the journey from feeling “thingified” to feeling fully human. The choice to begin and continue the coming out process is also a choice to affirm one’s place as subject rather than object of one’s own personal history. Leslie Feinberg’s book *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, published in 1996, moves the transgender, as a movement, from object to subject, placing the personal struggle within a historical context of struggle.

In conjunction with the nurturance of personal transformation, pastors can use their positions of authority transform society. They can also empower transgender and other members of their communities to become agents for social change. Starting from the assumption that none of us are free if some of us are oppressed, pastors can preach sermons, lead Bible study groups, and lead prayer groups that foster empathy and solidarity with all who are oppressed, whether by gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, religion, the list goes on. However, specific education on particular oppressions is necessary.

...[J]ust because an individual is drawn into the vortex of a movement, it doesn’t mean that person will automatically be enlightened on every aspect of other peoples’ oppressions—particularly that which they do not directly experience. Each individual still needs to overcome the bigotry that has been instilled in us from an early age. A gay man does not necessarily see the need to fight sexism automatically; a white transperson doesn’t automatically see the need to fight racism. But the progressive momentum inherent in movements offers a greater potential for individuals to gain an understanding of the struggles of others...<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Feinberg 51.

A second key factor in transformation is truly making the congregation welcoming of the “T” as well as the “GLB” in “GLBT.” Too often in our welcoming church movements “transgender” is just a politically correct add-on to “gay, lesbian, and bisexual.” A cursory survey of websites of Protestant welcoming church movements revealed that while the majority included transgender welcoming in their mission statement, the programs were essentially about welcoming diverse sexual orientations rather than gender identities.<sup>16</sup> The Unitarian Universalist Association’s Welcoming Congregation website<sup>17</sup> was the exception.

Transformation unfolds from a non-static view of God, a view in which God is “a hater of life-denying and health-destroying status quo and a lover of life-affirming and health promoting change.”<sup>18</sup> God also leads us into Chinula’s fourth step, “transcendence.” As people created in the image of God, our capacities for transformation cannot be limited by a humanly-imposed system of oppression. The pastoral caregiver’s job is to nurture in the transgender person the power to transcend the oppressor’s categories of gender and the power to transcend the oppressor’s unearned right to define transgender reality. Personhood transcends categories. In Chinula’s framework, we are all part of a divine reality that is greater than the sum of the parts of this world. This divine reality is within us and it transcends us. It can help us rise above oppression. Spiritual practices that tap into this transcendent spirit, such as prayer, singing, bodywork, and meditation, can call us into transcendence not only in our spiritual lives but in our whole lives.

The process of reclamation, conciliation, transformation, and transcendence is a particularly potent spiritual path, leading the way from brokenness to wholeness, nobodiness to somebodiness. In traveling this path with transgender people, the pastor is not alone. Traveling the path alongside will be the transgender person’s friends and loved ones, their community of support, their therapist, their co-workers, and their religious community. The loving support of a pastor through this journey can be healing in and of itself. It is challenging work, but the rewards are deep. And it brings us that much closer to truly embodying King’s vision of beloved community.

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<sup>16</sup> Websites reviewed by Sarah Gibb, 23 Oct. 2000.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.uua.org/obgltc>

<sup>18</sup> Chinula, 57-58.

As a social justice educator, I teach workshops and classes on social diversity. In my graduate program, I learned that in order to address oppression, I would need to focus on racism, sexism, homophobia, religious oppression, classism, and ableism. I am more than adept at teaching about and facilitating discussions about each of these forms of oppression. What is missing from most social justice education and from cultural diversity curricula, however, is education about transphobia and gender oppression.

## **Sex and Gender**

Most people think of gender as dichotomous and straightforward. Traditional Western notions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation dictate that upon our sex assignment at birth, we will fulfill the duties of the corresponding gender role, present ourselves appropriate to expected gender norms, and that as adults, we will be attracted to the “opposite” sex, making us heterosexual. Indeed, this paradigm is so pervasive it is beheld as natural, indisputable, and immutable. But, as Wilchins (1997, p. 67) points out, it is not so much that there have always been transgender people, but that there have always been cultures which have imposed regimes of gender.

In our culture, sex, gender, and sexual orientation have been intertwined to the point where most people resist the notion that there is any other way to think about them. Like a house of cards, it is almost impossible to pull them apart without the entire structure crumbling. However, it is only by deconstructing each of these concepts that we can fully understand the limitations of modern sex, gender, and sexual orientation paradigms as well as the potential of knocking down this structure.

## **Transgender people**

Those who identify as transgender are a varied lot, and currently the self-claimed term includes anyone who transgresses gender norms. While there is increasing visibility of transgender people, indeed, even when they are visible, transgender people have no way of being known except as “highly stigmatized individuals” (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998, p.82). Increasingly, this population includes more and more trans-identified youth. Young people who may have previously claimed a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, now include transgender as an option.

## **Gender oppression**

The norms of gender role and gender presentation are rigid, restrictive, and binding, and their preservation maintains an ongoing oppression affecting all of us. Though those who are viewed to be gender-variant are the major targets of this gender oppression, the limitations of a dichotomous gender system restrict each of us to particular admissible gender roles, concurrent with obligatory presentation. For gender variant-people, the effects of gender oppression can appear in a variety of forms and are manifested on the individual, cultural, and institutional levels. As a result, transgender people are targets of violence, both individual and institutional, are culturally marginalized and exploited, and are often tremendously ostracized. Butler (1990, p.140) notes that we regularly punish those who “fail to do their gender right.” Thus, people who consistently violate gender standards are, in essence, a target group oppressed by rigid gender norms and expectations. The daily consequences of challenging the bi-gendered system are numerous and stressful (Lucal, 1999).

A result of this oppression is that those who do conform to what is considered the norm are in essence, privileged. This gender privilege, which grants access, acceptance, and affirmation to

most people, remains unacknowledged in our culture. In addition to privileging gender conformity, gender oppression causes transgender people to internalize the multitudinous destructive messages they receive. This internalized oppression has a variety of pernicious consequences.

Those who are guilty of gender oppression include those who consider themselves tolerant or accepting of others; in other words, discrimination can come from feminists, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, and others. Further, transgender people risk rejection from friends and family, along with incredible isolation, a dearth of information about their experience, and immense social stigma.

### **Transgender issues and schools**

Recent incidents have demonstrated that transgender issues will continue to challenge school systems in a variety of ways. This is true not only for higher education, but for middle and high schools as well (see “His Name is Aurora”, Cloud, 2000). In the last 20 years, many college campus gay student organizations have transformed from being “Gay” organizations to “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender” groups, and the inclusion of transgender has not been in name only. On some campuses, transgender-identified students have formed groups separate from the gay student organizations. Further, in some high school settings, Gay-Straight Alliances are realizing the necessity of addressing issues of gender variance and transgenderism. Aside from Gay-Straight Alliances, high school administrators are increasingly having to address gender nonconformity as a matter of policy. For example, in Brockton, MA, a 2000 lawsuit brought by Pat Doe (a pseudonym) resulted in a court order for the school system to allow Pat to “dress as a girl at school” (Pfeiffer & Daniel, 2000). This case exemplifies the many students, mostly male, who have recently sued their schools for the right to wear “opposite gender” clothing to school. In addition to students who experience gender differences, there are other stakeholders in school systems, such as parents, teachers, and community members, for whom transgender issues are central. Therefore, for the sake of all of these individuals, it is important that educational systems take steps to address transgender issues in school before they are forced to address them in court.

### **What to do**

A majority of the population, both professionals and lay-people, continue to view transgender behavior as pathological. Even those who consider themselves liberal or progressive are uneasy with people who challenge gender to any magnitude. Until our culture is more comfortable with those who consider gender and sex to be flexible, fluid, and malleable, our society will not be a safe place for any of us to exist. Change begins with attitude—if we create a paradigm in which gender is perceived as a spectrum, fewer, if any, people will be considered deviantly gendered. Unfortunately, we are still in a period when gender variance is perceived as abnormal and is consequently sanctioned.

In the last ten years, there has been a dramatic shift in gender consciousness. This shift has resulted in a growing urge to mobilize the energy of transgender people and their allies in a force against discrimination. As more and more people identify as transgender, an identity beyond an individual one has developed. Acceptance has been sought through surgery, therapy, and now, many transgender people want to be accepted without changing themselves- but instead changing the culture.

In order to work against gender oppression, we need to understand how it affects those who experience it. Collectively, the experiences of those who live on the margins of gender may help us to realize methods of dismantling the limits of the many dualistic notions that exist within our culture. This population embodies the changing attitudes towards gender, and actualizes the importance of deconstructing social identities.

For any agent group, recognizing privilege is essential to ending oppression. In what ways do you experience gender privilege? How often do you take your gender for granted? Like racism, gender oppression cannot end without the initiative of the agent group. Those who experience gender privilege need to recognize it, speak out against gender oppression, and take action.

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# Jesse's Dream Skirt

—Bruce Mack

There are and always will be boys who wear dresses and skirts and things that whirl, twirl, flow and glow.

One boy, named Jesse, liked wrapping himself in sheets to make free-flowing dresses.

He also liked trying on his mother's old dresses, skirts, hats, and shoes. They were always too big.

Once when he tried walking in high-heeled shoes he tripped. His mother Jean told him, "I gave them up because I just couldn't walk in them. I like to wear comfortable things."

Jesse wanted a skirt that would fit well, one that he could wear everywhere he went. One night he dreamed of a skirt that whirled, twirled, flowed and glowed, and felt soft inside.

At first he saw a brown patch like the earth, a white patch like the clouds, a black patch like coal, red and yellow patches like flowers, and blue patches like the sky. Then he saw himself twirling around and around so that all the colors of his skirt flowed into each other, just like the colors on a top.

He was so excited about his dream that he got up early and went to his mother, who was just waking up. Jean smiled as he told her all about the skirt. "Could I have a skirt like that?" he asked.

"If you like I'll help you make your dream skirt," she said "But have you thought about what other kids will think when you wear it? Not everyone will be as happy about your dream skirt as you are Jesse. Some may even make fun of you."

Jesse shrugged his shoulders. "I'm going to wear my skirt anyway," He said proudly.

Jean hugged him and said, "Then we'll get started on it after breakfast."

When they were finished eating, Jesse went with Jean to her closet. There they went looking through her old dresses until they found colors and patterns like those he had seen in his dream.

They cut up the clothes and Jean helped Jesse put the patches and pieces together. As Jean sewed, Jesse stood beside her chair and watched the pieces he had cut become a skirt. Jean stopped sewing several times to let Jesse try it on. It took a while to get the skirt to fit just right.

"It looks just like the one in my dream," he said as he tried on the finished skirt. "I can't wait to show it to all my friends at school."

The next day Jean drove to the day care center and he wore his beautiful skirt. When Jesse walked in, his teacher, Bruce, saw his skirt, smiled, and said, "Well, look at you."

Jesse looked up. "Do you like it?"

Bruce thought a moment and replied, "Yes. You're like a butterfly that has just come out of its cocoon, spreading its bright-colored wings." This made Jesse feel good all over.

Soon all the children were standing around looking at Jesse. Some looked and then smiled. Others just plain stared. Still others laughed and pointed, saying, "What are you wearing that for? Boys don't wear dresses. Only girls do."

"I can wear what I want!" Jesse answered back. "Jesse is a sissy," John shouted. "Where is your purse and dolls?" Mary sneered.

Jesse became so upset that he ran off crying. Bruce went over and held him until he calmed down.

“I wanted everyone to like my dream skirt,” Jesse said. “Now I want to hide.” Curled up in Bruce’s lap, Jesse no longer looked like a butterfly but like a cocoon.

Bruce whispered, “Jesse, some of us liked your skirt a whole lot, but some didn’t. Let’s find out why.”

He called everyone together and said “Jesse loves his skirt. Why are some of you making fun of him?”

There was a silence. Then Mary said, “Because he looks funny. I never saw a boy wear a skirt before.”

“Yeah,” said John. “Boys can’t wear skirts.” “Why not?” Sarah said, starting to get mad. “Because that’s what my daddy told me.”

“Well, I wear pants. Why can’t Jesse wear a skirt?” “That’s different,” replied John. “Not really,” said Sarah. “My mother told me that a long time ago girls weren’t allowed to wear pants.”

Then Mike spoke up. “One day my mother let my sister and me try on her old dresses and hats. It was a lot of fun. But then my father came in. When he saw us he got really mad and yelled at me, Take off that dress. I don’t want my son to be a sissy! So I took off the dress. But I don’t know I still don’t see what’s wrong with it.”

John hadn’t changed his mind. “No matter what you say, I could not wear a skirt. I don’t want anyone to think I’m a girl.”

“Nobody’s asking you to wear a skirt,” said Sarah. “Just let Jesse be.”

Dawn nodded and said, “You know whenever I put on my favorite blue striped baseball uniform the boys next door always say ‘Are you sure you’re not a boy?’ And you know what I say every time? I say, It doesn’t matter what I wear. I’m still me.”

So many of the children started talking at once that Jesse couldn’t tell who said what. He heard, “Yeah, Dawn’s right,” and “That’s happened to me too,” and “I think Jesse’s skirt looks sort of nice.” Most of them liked his skirt!

This made Jesse feel so good that he began to tell everyone about his dream and how he and his mother made the skirt.

After the story Bruce took a piece of cloth from a box and wrapped it like a loose skirt around his waist. Several of the children went over to the material box and pulled out all sorts of things to try on. Soon others joined in. Some made dresses with long pieces of cloth.

Some tied large square pieces around their shoulders to make capes. Some tied ribbons around their heads and others used scarves to make turbans. Jesse thought they looked beautiful as they paraded around the room, dancing and shouting. And Jesse didn’t mind that some just watched.

Jesse began twirling around and around so that all the colors of his skirt flowed into each other, just like the colors on a top.

# Renaming Ceremony

(sample 1)

## Commentary:

*The names of the author and some participants have been changed.*

On May 1st, 1997, Starr King School for the Ministry held a naming ceremony for me. I was taking a class on rites of passage taught by Yielbonzie Charles Johnson called "Stations on the Wheel of Life." Having just come to terms with my transsexuality and begun the process of "coming out" to the community, there were a lot of questions in the air about what this meant for me and for the community.

One of the concrete questions was "Which name should I call you and which pronouns are appropriate?" At first my answer was, "Oh, I prefer 'Dave' and male pronouns, but you can change to that as you are comfortable." But as I studied rites of passage, I found I was doing a disservice to myself and to the community. It simply was not the responsibility of each individual to decide when he or she was comfortable with my new identity. So when it came time to suggest rites of passage that we could do as a class, I offered myself and my story.

Three people [of varying genders] from the class volunteered to help create the ritual. They asked me a lot of questions, and we focused our thinking on what I wanted the ritual to do. I had three tasks in mind. I wanted a chance to grieve my losses, especially the loss of the community of women. I wanted a chance to be welcomed into the community as a man. And I wanted to give the community a context in which to view my transition.

At that point, my co-planners kicked me out of the group! I was the initiate, and needed to experience the ritual as it happened. With a lot of trepidation, I left them to the task of planning the ritual that would change my identity forever.

On the day of the ritual, I was shown the order of service and given a basic idea of what would happen at each step along the way. There would be a time of separation, a time of liminality, and a time of reaggregation. I would speak to the community and articulate what I wanted from them. And I would be blessed and renamed.

Before the ritual the rites of passage class had struggled to sort out the difference between a ritual and a rite of passage. When the naming ceremony was over I was able to sum up the difference in a simple sentence. After a rite of passage, neither the initiate nor the community will ever be the same again.

## The Ritual:

At five o'clock I was led into a room with the women of the community. Led by *Jane*, they began by telling me how they were feeling about my transition and said good-bye to me. It was really hard. Some were angry, most were sad, but all of them wished me love and luck. Then they encircled me and led me to the door singing "Return Again."

*(lyrics: Return again. Return again. Return to the land of your soul. Return to what you are. Return to who you are. Return to where you are. Born and reborn again.)*

As they sang they escorted me into the chapel where I was to spend some time alone.

The altar was decorated with pictures of other female-to-male transsexuals, so I was surrounded by my "ancestors". I lit the chalice, blessed myself, and prayed to my forebearers for

strength and courage. I gave thanks for the amazing support in which I was being held and which I knew none of them had experienced in their transitions.

Then I was escorted out to the courtyard to the men. Led *Joe*, they welcomed me with greetings and an amazing chant.(complete with yells, bird-like screams and drumming.) They danced me back to the chapel, where the women were still singing "Return Again" and the two songs merged into a cacophony of voices.

*Jane* stepped forward and read the opening words:

*What authority do we possess to perform such a ritual?*

*This naming ceremony that flies in the face of all the conventions we have yet known?*

*How can we do this new and terrifying thing?*

*And yet, as Unitarian Universalists, rooted in a free faith, how can we not?*

*We are called by our God--Spirit of Infinite Justice and Goodness, Creator and Comforter--*

*To embrace the inherent worth and dignity of Dave [use full new name],*

*To be in keeping with the principles we profess to believe.*

*Although we are honoring this as a crucial turning point for Dana [use old name], it may be an even more crucial turning point for us. For as we watch Dana bloom into Dave, we have the unique opportunity to act as religious witnesses; to put our beliefs into action as we welcome Dave to the table. Amen.*

Next was an invocation of courageous spirits. The stories of other female-to-male transsexuals were read and their names were called. (Billie Tipton, Brandon Teena, James Green, and others...) Each was greeted with the congregational response:

*"Welcome \_\_\_\_\_, your struggle bears fruit today. Be with us now and strengthen our friend as he claims his new identity."*

We then sang "Do You Hear?", a hymn about the inner "still small voice."

Then I talked. I told a little of my story and read a few passages from my journal. But I had been specifically asked to make clear what I was asking from the community. I asked them three things:

- 1) Recognize that my whole self has called me to undertake this journey and that my body and spirit long to be whole; recognize that this is a profoundly spiritual journey and not a disorder.
- 2) Understand that though it has become necessary for me to rename and re-gender myself I will always live in the sacred liminal spaces.
- 3) Let my journey be a gift to the community. Let it enter and stir up questions of integrity: What parts of yourself have you hidden, lost, or left behind? How can those parts be healed and brought back to you? What right and responsibility do you have to be whole? And how will you bring yourself--broken and whole--back to the community? What gift do you have to bring?

When I finished, the actual act of naming began. It was an overwhelming experience for me. (Tears still come when I think of it.) First of all, Rebecca Parker, the president of Starr King, brought out the "cloak of protection" that was made for the new faculty's installation. It is a long cloak made of panels of many colors. Each panel bears a word that is important to one of the faculty members. I was asked to wear the cloak and move around the room to be greeted as they sang to me.

*(Lyrics: Dave, you are beautiful. Dave, you are strong. Wonderful to be with, you carry us along. Dave, hear our song.)*

While I walked people shouted out affirmations like: "He is a good friend." "He is brave." "He is a good parent."

This was the beginning of the use of male pronouns to refer to me in the community. (They even printed a little statement in the order of service: "Please note that after the service "*Dana*" will be known as "*Dave*" and "she" and "her" will be replaced by "he" and "him".)

Then Rebecca Parker read an affirmation and blessing that she wrote in response to my journal, which I had shared with her<sup>1</sup>.

The closing song alternated verses from "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" and "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle."

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<sup>1</sup> The *Name Change Affirmation and Blessing* is on the following page.

# Name Change Affirmation and Blessing

—Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

*The world is blessed by people  
who let their honest face show,  
who take off all the masks  
that hide the soul  
or put on the masks  
that reveal the soul.*

*Those who do so  
witness that it is possible for human beings  
to be present to one another in truth.*

*This possibility is often avoided or denied,  
by acts of censure,  
silencing, and violence.*

*Those who insist on presence  
are faithful to an imperative  
deep within themselves  
that they have chosen to affirm  
regardless of the cost.*

*Their action  
resists violence  
with authenticity  
and denial  
with affirmation.*

*Those who choose to be present  
bless the human community  
by calling forth the presence of others.  
They are faithful to the possibility  
that always exists among people  
that instead of denial and violence  
we will meet one another in love,  
eye to eye, soul to soul.*

*They are emissaries of Eros.  
As the lover sang to the beloved in the Song of Songs,  
"O my dove, who art in the clefts of the rock,  
in the secret places of the stair,  
let me see thy countenance  
let me hear thy voice,  
for sweet is thy voice."  
Love desires real presence.  
Real presence calls forth love.*

*Bless you, [Full new name],*

# Workshops

## **Session 1**

**(90 minutes)**

**Materials:** Newsprint, markers, *Transgender 201* (1 copy per participant)

### **Opening and Check-In:** (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and make sure everyone knows where to find restrooms, water, telephone, etc. Introduce the program, allowing time for people to ask basic questions. Circulate a sheet of paper, and ask everyone to write down his/hir/her contact information for your records.

All sessions will begin with a general check-in. In this session, participants should introduce themselves and briefly state their expectations for the program.

Ask a volunteer to record on newsprint as participants determine ground rules for participation in this group (see "Getting Started"). Post the rules and review them at the beginning of the next session.

### **Words and Meanings:** (60 minutes)

Ask participants to find a partner. Tell them you are going to tell them a word. Ask them to share with their partner when they first learned this word and how they learned what it means. If this is the first time they have heard the word, encourage them to share that as well. Some of these words will be new for many people. Tell each pair they will have two minutes each for each word. Do not provide any definition or clarification of any of these words:

boys/men  
girls/women  
crossdresser  
male-to-female transsexual  
female-to-male transsexual  
hermaphrodites  
drag queen  
drab king  
intersexual  
Transgender Person  
third-gender person  
your own gender identity\*

*You may have more than 1 answer.*

After you have completed this list, reform as a large group. Tell participants you are going to complete a chart (shown below). Ask participants to share when they learned about each of these terms and whether it was a positive, negative, or neutral experience. Proceed through the chart. Upon completing the chart, discuss briefly what they know and do not know and when they learned it.

	Age 0-10	Age 11-15	Age 16-20	Age 21-30	Age 31-40	Age 41-50	Age 51+	Don't Know It Now
boys/men								
+, -, N								
girls/women								
+, -, N								
cross-dressers								
+, -, N								
MtF transsexuals								
+, -, N								
FtM transsexuals								
+, -, N								
hermaphrodites								
+, -, N								
drag queens								
+, -, N								
drag kings								
+, -, N								
intersexual								
+, -, N								
transgender person								
+, -, N								
3 <sup>rd</sup> gender person								
+, -, N								
your own gender identity*								
+, -, N								

*\*Tell participants that they may have more than 1 answer when answering about their own gender.  
(+ = positive, - = negative, N = neutral)*

**Transgender 102:** (10 minutes)

Pass out *Transgender 102* (the most recent version can be found on the website [www.uua.org/obgltc/tg102.pdf](http://www.uua.org/obgltc/tg102.pdf)). Review the different definitions and ask for comments and questions.

Spend some time discussing the difference between gender identification and sexual orientation. You may wish to ask people why the phrasing “bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender” is used as opposed to “bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender.”

**Closing Circle:** (5 minutes)

Invite participants to join hands as they are comfortable. Ask each person to share one thought on today's workshop.

## **Session 2**

**(90 minutes)**

**Materials:** Newsprint, markers/crayons, ground rules (from last session)

**Opening and Check-In:** (20 minutes)

Welcome participants and remind everyone where to find restrooms, water, telephone, etc. Remind them of the ground rules that were decided upon last session (posted on a wall for all to see). Ask participants if there is anything that they would like added or changed.

Ask participants to take a moment to relax in their seats and close their eyes if they are comfortable doing so. Ask them to quietly think about their answers to the questions you are about to ask. Request that they pay special attention to their gender and body. At 30-second intervals, ask the following questions:

- What in the past week has happened that made you aware of your body?
- ... and your gender?
- What restrictions have been placed on your life because of your gender?
- What opportunities have arisen for you because of your gender?
- What do you like least about your gender?
- What do you like most about your gender?

After a few minutes, invite everyone to open their eyes and sit up as they are ready.

**Behaviors:** (50 minutes)

Have participants divide up into groups based on their gender (1 group for each gender represented in the room). Give each group a piece of newsprint and some markers/crayons. Ask each group to draw/write stereotypes (positive and negative) that they have heard about their gender. After 20 minutes invite groups to rotate so that they can do the same for each of the other genders. Allow only 5 minutes per sheet for this part.

Once each group has gone to each page of newsprint, ask participants to return to their original page. Invite each group to explain their newsprint page and allow for discussion among the larger group. Make sure to discuss the reality of each stereotype.

**Homework:** (15 minutes)

Ask participants to break up into pairs. Invite each pair to discuss briefly with their partner their favorite chapter of the book *TransLiberation*. Ask them to include why this chapter of the book is their favorite and what they learned from it.

Invite participants to spend time over the next week writing a 1-2 page reflection about their experience with gender and in particular, transgender. Ask them to include how they learned about gender, what their experiences around gender have been, and what they hope for the future. Invite them to discuss their understanding of their own gender in relation to all the other genders they now know about. Encourage them to stretch themselves and share their fears, concerns, and hesitations about gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

Let them know that next session will have time set aside for them to share their reflections with the rest of the participants.

**Closing Circle:** (5 minutes)

Invite participants to join hands as they are comfortable. Ask each person to share one thought on today's workshop.

## **Session 3**

**(90 minutes)**

**Materials:** Newsprint, markers/crayons, ground rules (from last session)

**Opening and Check-In:** (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and remind everyone where to find restrooms, water, telephone, etc. Remind them of the ground rules that were decided upon last session (posted on a wall for all to see). Ask participants if there is anything that they would like added or changed.

Ask participants to share any experiences they had in the past week that made them aware of the dualistic gender-system our society tends to uphold.

**Reflection:** (20 minutes)

Ask participants to divide up into groups of 3-4 people. Give each group a piece of newsprint and markers/crayons. Ask each group to draw/write what society would look like if transphobia did not exist. After 15 minutes invite each group to share with the larger group what they drew/wrote.

**Sharing of Stories:** (45 minutes)

Invite participants to read their homework reflections aloud to the other participants. Invite participants to discuss the content after each reading.

**Closing Circle:** (5 minutes)

Invite participants to join hands as they are comfortable. Ask each person to share their thoughts about their experiences in this discussion group.

