



Message

"We are all works in progress" by Leslie Feinberg, Transliberation: beyond pink or blue

...All your life, you've heard such dogma about what it means to be a "real" woman or a "real" man. And chances are you've choked on some of it. You've balked at the idea that being a woman means to be thin as a rail, emotionally nurturing, and an airhead when it comes to balancing her check book. You know in your guts that being a man has nothing to do with rippling muscles, innate courage, or knowing how to handle a chain saw. These are really caricatures. Yet these images have been drilled into us through popular culture and education. ... These ideas ... straightjacket the freedom of individual self-expression. These gender messages play on and on in a continuous loop in our brains, like commercials that can't be muted.

In my lifetime I've seen social upheavals challenge this sex and gender doctrine. As a child who grew up during the McCarthyite, Father Knows Best 1950s, who came of age during the second wave of women's liberation in the United States, I've seen transformations in the ways people think and talk about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Many today who are too young to remember what life was like before the women's movement need to know that this was a tremendously progressive development that won significant economic and social reform... This struggle by women and their allies swung human consciousness forward like a pendulum.... This was a big step for humanity. And even the period of political reaction that followed has not been able to overturn all the gains made by that important social movement.

Now another movement is sweeping onto the stage of history: Trans liberation. ... We are a movement of masculine females and feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexual men and women, intersexuals born on the anatomical sweep between female and male, gender-blenders, many other sex and gender-variant people, and our significant others. All told, we expand understanding of how many ways there are to be a human being....

Our struggle [exposes] some of the harmful myths of what it means to be a woman or a man that have compartmentalized and distorted your life, as well as mine. Trans liberation has meaning for you – no matter how you define or express your sex or your gender.

If you are a trans-person, you face horrendous social punishment - from institutionalization to gang rape, from beatings to denial of child visitation.... This brutalization and degradation strips us of what we could achieve with our individual lifetimes.

And if you do not identify as transgender or transsexual or intersexual, your life is diminished by our oppression as well. Your individual journey to express yourself is shunted into one of two deeply carved ruts, and the social baggage you are handed is already packed.

So the defense of each individual's right to control their own body, and to explore the path of self-expression, enhances your own freedom to discover more about yourself and your potentialities. This...



will give you more room to breathe – to be yourself. To discover on a deeper level what it means to be yourself.

### Sermon

I have a friend who for most of his life, has been trying on different ways of doing gender. He was born into the physical body of a male, but he just never felt his gender the way it seemed other guys felt their gender. He walked a certain way, he talked a certain way, he had certain hand gestures, and he felt comfortable in clothing that marked him as different from a normal guy. I know this because we went to high school together, and I felt both intimidated by him and drawn to him because he lived in his body in a way that no man I knew did. As we became friends, I learned how difficult it was for him to grow up in our small town, where there was so little room for who he was. His sense of humor often saved him from difficult, potentially violent situations when his appearance and behavior threatened those, usually men, who just couldn't handle who he was.

In his mid-20s, Joseph moved to Toronto because he needed to be somewhere that he could explore what was going on inside him. With its large gay community and cosmopolitan culture, Toronto seemed like the place for him. As luck would have it, I needed a roommate, so we moved in together. Well, I tell you, I had no idea what I was in for. That man soon had more cosmetics than I did, and had no clue how to use them. He built this fantastic wardrobe with everything from the toughest leather pants and motorcycle boots to leather floor-length coats, feather boas and fishnet stockings. I was never quite sure who would be waiting for me when I came home. Would I be greeted by heels and mini skirts, or leather pants and a muscle shirt, or the kind of gear I don't think I'd feel comfortable describing in a Sunday morning sermon. Life with Joseph was never dull, and I don't know who grew more – me or him – as he explored all those parts of himself that had been held in check all those years.

It was a great time for Joseph, and I'm glad I could be part of that time for him. But it also became clear that he suffered from pretty severe emotional damage because he'd held himself back for so long. Joseph did not have the room to fully explore his gender expression during those key years, the years of adolescence, when you're supposed to be pushing the envelop and figuring out who you are. It seemed to me that, like so many people who live in closets for far too long, he had stopped maturing emotionally at a certain point. Sometimes, Joseph had the maturity level of someone at least ten years younger than he was. This happened particularly in the realm of emotional intimacy. All those years of suppressing himself left Joseph disconnected from himself, and thus less able to really connect with others, whether it was friends or lovers... or a roommate. Joseph had a hard time seeing beyond himself because he'd never been allowed to really just be himself. I saw a lot of sadness and desperation in his heart. He had difficulty holding onto a sense of self worth and let lovers and friends treat him disrespectfully. He had great difficulty building mutual relationships, and alternated between giving too much and being utterly selfish.

And, he continued to be misunderstood by others, including me. There was this assumption, perhaps you have already made it, that he was gay. There is little to no room in our perceptions of male

heterosexuality for someone who lives his gender like Joseph does. Well, after a few experiments he found he really wasn't gay. Then he thought he might be bisexual, and that didn't work either. He finally came to accept that he was pretty much heterosexual. He was a heterosexual man whose gender presentation could be either masculine or feminine. And that posed another challenge. There would have been many opportunities to meet potential partners in the gay and bisexual communities who would have embraced his gender bending. That potential dropped sharply when he realized he was going to need a woman who could embrace all that he was. Let's face it, most women aren't looking for a guy like Joseph. Heterosexual women are often equally as attached to the normative standards of male heterosexuality as heterosexual men are. So, it seemed as if Joseph was going to have a hard path to walk.

It would be easy for many of us to look at the example of Joseph and say; "I don't have anything in common with Joseph. I'm not uncomfortable with my gender, so this isn't my issue," but Leslie Feinberg would disagree. In our reading this morning, Leslie Feinberg suggests that the way we do gender in this society has created a straight jacket for all of us. The straight jacket is simply more apparent for those like Joseph who stand closer to the edges. There are certain expectations we have of people depending on their sex, and there is a great deal of explicit, meaning out in the open, and implicit, meaning more hidden, ways that we are pressured to fall in line with those expectations. This pressure comes from our friends, our families, the entertainment, advertising and fashion industry, from our churches and schools, from inside ourselves, it comes from everywhere.

Think about the song we sang this morning. For many women, every bone and muscle in our bodies does not say yes to itself because we so easily judge our bodies by whatever standards we're told are beautiful – which is basically thin and young and well manicured – and then measure our self worth by how well we match up. For many men, it is a challenge to enter into intimacy. To say,, "I need you please hold me," doesn't fly with the message men receive that the need for intimacy is a weakness.

Each of the two predominant genders is, on a daily basis, pushed towards a closet that says men behave this way, and women behave that way. Men get to do these things, and women get to do these things. Men can feel these emotions and women can feel these emotions. Men wear this and women wear this. What this means is that to a certain degree, so there's a gap between who we are inside and who we are on the outside. That gap is just more apparent for people like Joseph, but we all have it. This is what Leslie Feinberg is talking about, in saying that not only people like Joseph pay a price for the way our society does gender.

Women are more likely to suffer from obesity, anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Women experience low self-esteem, high rates of depression, and are more likely to contemplate and attempt suicide. Women are less likely to believe that anger is an appropriate emotion and will suppress it so that it mutates into other emotions that are more acceptable for women, like sadness and depression and fear.

Men are less likely to believe that sadness and depression and fear are appropriate emotions and will suppress them until they mutate into anger, which is considered an appropriate emotion for men. While fewer men attempt suicide, they are more likely to be successful when they try, perhaps a reflection of the



need to succeed at whatever you do. With the emphasis on strength and courage, men are more likely to take life-threatening risks, including dangerous driving and unprotected sex, less likely to follow up about health concerns, which means diseases, when discovered, are often much farther along. With the emphasis on always being in control, men have fewer close friends than women, which is why, although men do better economically after a divorce, they are often much more emotionally crippled.

This is the straight jacket that Leslie Feinberg talks about – the straight jacket where your physical sex is supposed to determine your gender, where to be male is to be masculine and to be female is to be feminine.

I want to acknowledge as Leslie did that there have been incredible advances made in the last 30 years, and the women's movement is a prime reason for that. When women began to question the June Cleaver model of womanhood, that defined a woman by her husband and her children, it was as if Pandora's box had been opened. The opportunities women have today are incredible, compared to the opportunities available to our mothers and grandmothers. The women's movement also opened the door for men to go beyond the limits of their gender. Men are now much more actively involved in raising their children and more aware of their needs for intimacy. It has become more socially acceptable to display a greater range of emotions, and to enter traditionally female-dominated work areas.

I would say the expansion of gender roles been one of the most significant social and spiritual renewals of our time. It has changed everything – from our own individual expectations of what life can offer, our understanding of family and marriage, expectations of work and school, it has changed the way we learn, the way we understand each other and ourselves, and it has changed the way we do religion.

Religious women and men have taken the lessons of the women's movement, with its emphasis on the sharing of power, and expanded how we understand the nature of God. For many Christians and theists, God's nurturing side has been reclaimed, and there is greater balance between God the Mother and God the Father. Reconceptualizing how we see God has freed both women and men to be their whole selves. Made in the image of God, we are all both masculine and feminine and there is sacredness and power in each.

We see this power in stories like *The Wild Swans*. Without her brothers Eliza felt like a piece of herself had been ripped away. She needed her brothers the way all women need to reclaim their masculine selves to become whole women. The same is true for her brothers. They needed her woven shirts to become whole themselves, just as all men need to reclaim their feminine selves to become whole men. Like Eliza and her brothers, there is an emptiness inside us if we are cut off from expressing both the masculine and the feminine. It is not only people like Joseph who experience a short circuit in their emotional development. In some way, we have all fallen short of our true potential, we are held back from experiencing the true unleashing of love so long as we keep gender chained to sex, so long as the sex we are born into is understood to determine our gender expression. You aren't less of a man if you are feminine. And you aren't less of a woman if you are masculine. And you can't be either if you aren't both.



At the center of Unitarian Universalism rests the promise of wholeness. It is our form of salvation. Salvation doesn't have to come from some outside place. It is not granted to us because we are good or obedient or because we believe the right things. Salvation is not something you have to wait for until you die. Salvation can happen today, it can happen tomorrow, it can happen like drops of water that slowly fill an empty well. Salvation happens, it is an act of becoming, it is what gently grows in us as we transform all those prisons that hold us back into gates of redemption. Salvation blossoms as we reach into our deepest selves and out in unconditional love to those who need salvation as much as we do. We are co-creators in the act of salvation, like rivulets of the divine that collect into a massive river. We are as much the vessel as the one who makes the vessel.

And what that means is that each of us has the power to reclaim the masculine and the feminine. Joseph layered his body in leather and feathers. Eliza wove shirts for her brothers. Reclaiming can happen through dress, behavior, therapy. It can happen through political activism, through spiritual seeking, through study, meditation and prayer. It can happen in our most intimate relationships and just by living truthfully and with an open heart and mind. It can happen when you meet someone like Joseph or Leslie and welcome them into your circle.

I haven't seen Joseph for many years now, but we periodically keep in touch. What I do know is that the longer Joseph has been able to do gender his way, the more connected he becomes to himself, and the more he is able to do the back and forth that is needed in intimate relationships. He has been able to find women who are looking for the kind of man he is, and who can affirm and even enjoy the way he does gender. Most of the women he dates are quite secure in their own womanhood, and in some cases, they can even become more whole themselves because of loving a man like him. After all, when one person loves truthfully, it opens the door for others to do the same. It's been good to see Joseph becoming more whole, coming more closely connected to the kind of salvation I have imagined for him, that I imagine for all of us.

May we hold onto that which frees us, and let go of that which imprisons. And in the holding on and letting go, let us never let go of the one thing that stands stronger than them all, the saving power of love.

Amen and blessed be.