

GENDER IDENTITY & OUR FAITH COMMUNITIES

a congregational guide for transgender advocacy



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As allies, we are not experts on the transgender experience and have therefore relied on the teachings of others in order to create this curriculum.

First and foremost, this is the work of an extraordinary group of contributors, listed on the preceding page, who gave this project its depth and breadth. We encourage you to read their essays in their complete form, available here. In addition, we have been blessed by an equally gifted group of advisers, including: Angel Collie, Monica Cross, Rev. Malcolm Himschoot, Dr. Joel Kushner, Melanie Martinez and Dr. Dawnne Woodie.

We also wish to thank Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. and its pastor, Rev. Amy Butler, for organizing a pilot run of the curriculum with its congregation and at its church. Calvary Baptist Church, one of the most welcoming congregations we have encountered, helped us strengthen the connection between a planned curriculum and how participants actually experienced it. We gladly thank HRC's associate director of diversity, Rev. Allyson Robinson, who came to this project in midstream and compassionately, yet firmly, let us know where we were off the mark. Allyson is a contributor to the curriculum, an ongoing consultant and led our pilot training at Calvary Baptist Church. Finally, we thank the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) for use of its *Media Reference Guide — Transgender Glossary of Terms*, available at www.glaad.org/media/guide/transfocus.php.

We are blessed to have such a thoughtful and spiritually engaged community assisting us. Although we owe the curriculum's strengths to them, all errors or omissions are ours alone.

Rev. Chris Glaser and Dr. Sharon Groves
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INTRODUCTION



A NOTE FROM
THE EDITOR.

Why this resource is needed

In many congregations, members who bring attention to a need or concern often are put in charge of meeting that need or addressing that concern! After all, we're all responsible in a spiritual community for the welfare of our members and the outreach of our congregations.

That's how I happened into this assignment. I was disappointed that "gender identity" had been dropped from the list of protected categories in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 2007 before Congress, however temporarily. Voicing my opinion, I was met with HRC's commitment to grassroots education in religious communities to support an ENDA that includes gender identity when it again comes up for a vote. This required gaining the support of the constituencies of elected officials; thus the need for this curriculum. Many voters do not yet understand gender identity and the transgender experience, let alone recognize how important a justice issue it is. People of faith have a vital role to play in this movement just as they do in other quests for justice.

Faith traditions challenge believers to reach out to those in need and to address injustice. "Love thy neighbor" is a corollary with the love of God or the honoring of life as sacred. All major religions have a golden rule about treating others as well as we would like to be treated. And, at their best, religious communities work hard to be inclusive.

One contributor to this curriculum told me she had recently been talking with a very progressive spiritual leader and was astonished to hear him use "bisexual" and "transgender" interchangeably. She knew

his heart was in the right place, but she realized the need for a study guide and advocacy training curriculum such as this for people like him.

Before I accepted myself as a gay man, I saw the film “The Christine Jorgenson Story” during its 1970 release in movie theaters. Just 19 at the time and aware of how I did not “live up” to gender expectations, I easily empathized with Christine Jorgenson’s experience. I viewed transgender acceptance as a “no-brainer,” only to discover in the decades since that prejudice and ignorance about the transgender experience may be deeper and broader than prejudice and ignorance about same-gender sexual relationships.

I also learned firsthand among friends, colleagues, congregants and those who attended and/or hosted my speaking engagements around the United States how broad an umbrella the term “transgender” is. As with any emerging movement, more and more transgender people have told unique stories and borne witness to distinct and diverse identities, giving rise to a host of new terms and definitions that honor these distinctions and diversities.

For several years now I have proudly served on the board of directors of the Southern Association for Gender Education (SAGE), intended to educate professionals in their dealings with transgender colleagues, coworkers, congregants, clients and patients. It was co-founded by a contributor to this curriculum, the Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson, a Presbyterian minister and therapist; and a Muslim colleague who has contributed an article pseudonymously. They were among the first I consulted about what should be included. Our list then expanded based on the work that HRC’s Religion and Faith Program has done in the past three years to engage with transgender people and allies.

The experts in this field are transgender people themselves. Thus this study gathers essays from transgender people of faith, as well as family members and clergy who embrace them.

Synchronizing excerpts into a three-hour curriculum was my responsibility, but should not deter anyone from reading all of the essays available in this collection. A reading group of the initial draft consisting of transgender people and other experts in the field has added greatly to the depth, clarity and accuracy of the final product.

It is no longer sufficient simply to lump the transgender experience together with the lesbian, gay and bisexual experience. The transgender experience deserves and requires its own focus. Though it is appropriate to link LGBT experience because all of us endure discrimination and abuse for not fitting society’s gender expectations, the transgender experience may be lost in the complexities of the broader conversation. And, above all, gender identity should not be confused with sexual orientation.

I am grateful for the freedom from gender conformity and expectations that is heralded by the transgender movement. Alongside the women’s movement and the progressive men’s movement, transgender people are reshaping our cultural and congregational attitudes, empowering and inspiring a greater range of gender expression for us all.

The [Stonewall rebellion](#) that is said to have initiated the contemporary LGBT rights movement in the U.S. was led in large part by transgender individuals. To leave them out of any progress toward equal rights, as many have, is not only unjust but deprives all of us of the rich contribution transgender people bring to the LGBT movement and to our history as Americans. Our hope is that *Gender Identity and Our Faith Communities: A Congregational Guide toward Transgender Advocacy* will help ensure transgender people’s places at the table in both our religious and political efforts for equality.

Rev. Chris Glaser
Atlanta, Ga.

How to use this resource

THE PURPOSE

We intend to empower participants with knowledge, purpose and skills to transform their congregations and communities into welcoming environments which not only support but advocate for the rights of transgender people. Specifically it is hoped this will prompt inclusion of “gender identity” in all protected categories of local, state and federal legislation.

THE FOUNDATION

The foundation of this curriculum is the writings of transgender people, their families and clergy. The 12 essays contained in Part Two collectively serve as the **content** of the curriculum. Because they cannot be presented in their entirety within a three-hour time frame, dramatic readings consisting of adapted and condensed excerpts from these essays provide a relatively brief way to hear from the diverse voices and experiences of the contributing writers.

THE FOCUS

This curriculum should be **viewed as a beginner’s course** that represents some but not all transgender experience in faith communities. What a Christian sage wrote of spiritual community, that “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit,” is true for the transgender community, which enjoys a spiritual kinship diverse in its expressions, some of which are only now coming to light, others of which will emerge later. This evolution may result in this and all such curricula becoming quickly dated as terms change and transgender diversity is further revealed. This is not to say the transgender experience is new; rather, it has a long history transcending millennia which this curriculum does not include.

With the exception of Rayees Shah’s essay, written from a Muslim perspective, **this training draws largely from Jewish and Christian faith traditions** in the anticipation that this is our largest likely audience for a faith-based curriculum in the United States.

For further reading:
See Rayees Shah’s essay,
“[Reconnecting with Allah.](#)”

Those who are not of those faith traditions or no longer affiliated with them may also find this curriculum helpful in engaging Jews and Christians in

dialogue. [Additional resources](#) for other faiths are listed at the end of the curriculum.

READING BEYOND THE CURRICULUM

All of the essays by contributing members are available on the website and [at the end of this curriculum](#). We encourage the leader(s) to read all of these essays prior to the planned training and to consider printing out a few of the essays for the group that may seem particularly appropriate. Alongside the excerpts in the study guide, these essays are the nearest you can come to having the contributors themselves engaging with you in the dialogue. **To encourage further use of the study after the training**, the essays and the curriculum itself are available on-line at www.hrc.org/religion for participants to prepare or debrief as desired.

TEACHING THE CURRICULUM

The **advocacy trainer** of *Gender Identity and Our Faith Communities* should if at all possible be a skilled transgender leader or a pairing of a strong ally and a transgender person who both have experience in leading groups. HRC’s Religion and Faith Program has a list of transgender advocacy trainers and is willing to work with you to help identify potential leaders in your area in coordination with leadership from your congregation or group. Please e-mail us at religion@hrc.org to discuss the availability of teachers in your area.

A NOTE ON INTERSEX ADVOCACY

Intersex people need additional legal protections beyond the scope of this training. We strongly encourage that leaders and participants become familiar with the issues facing intersex people and ways to support the rights of intersex people.

A good way to get started in this is to go to the [Intersex Society of North America](#).

USING RECORDINGS

Recordings of the [Dramatic Readings](#) used in this curriculum are available on the [website](#) and can be easily downloaded to a computer or mp3 player or other listening device for the training. These readings done by actors, ministers and transgender advocates provide a vibrant rendering of the stories and we encourage you to use them.

However, you may also wish to engage participants for all or some of the dramatic readings. The advantage of having congregants reading is that the reader volunteers have the opportunity to hear the stories told “from the inside out,” and other congregants hear the transgender experience in familiar voices. We encourage you to mix things up in ways that best suits your needs.

HANDBOOK

Each section uses materials that we have compiled as part of a handbook. You will want to make copies of the handbook for each participant. In addition to providing materials to use during the training, these handouts contain information that participants will want to have after the training. **Note: you will not be able to work through all the items in the handbook in the time allotted and will need to make decisions about which parts to include prior to leading discussion.**

PLANNING YOUR TIME

The curriculum is designed in timed segments that add up to **three hours, including breaks**. The purpose of each segment or “step,” is clearly stated at the beginning of each section. **Plan to have ten-minute breaks after Step One and after Step Two.**

Note: We have intentionally designed this curriculum to last three hours in order to enable the training to be done in an afternoon or evening. However, if you have more time or would like to use this as a series we have suggestions throughout of ways you might expand the training.

Remember that the curriculum is an advocacy training manual first and foremost. Throughout the curriculum, we have guidelines about how to cut or shorten the exercises if you are running out of time. You do not, however, want to give short shrift to the third section on advocacy training! When going through the curriculum always:

- **Pay close attention to the time.**
- Prepare **in advance** activities that you might cut if needed.
- **Give full time to the third section on advocacy training.**
- Do not go over three hours unless agreed upon with participants **in advance.**



This curriculum was made for you, not you for this curriculum! Throughout, we give suggestions of ways to **select, adapt, modify, shorten or lengthen parts as needed**, while fulfilling the purpose of the curriculum stated above. We also offer suggestions for further use with your community.

ESTABLISHING A RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENT

There are many opportunities for conversation among the participants in **pairs, small groups and plenary sessions**. The intent of the dramatic readings and handbook are to foster dialogue rather than debate. To ensure this, the leader(s) should create an atmosphere of inquiry in which participants understand that there are no “dumb” questions and that there may be multiple views and even many “right” answers.

ENCOURAGE PARTICIPANTS TO

- **ask questions**, but only if they really want to listen to the answer.
- **listen** to each other **with their hearts** as much as their minds.
- **remain respectful** of others as they respond to ideas and feelings.
- **keep personal information anonymous** beyond this setting.

The bold words in the list above could be listed on a flipchart or PowerPoint in front of the gathering.

One of the gifts of faith traditions is silence, an opportunity for reflection. In gatherings like this, some participants will be quick to speak while the rest of us are still thinking. Thus, throughout this curriculum there will be opportunities for participants to consult their own hearts and minds in a brief moment — 30 seconds or so — of inward reflection.

The leader(s) may wish to consult the [Introduction of HRC's curriculum on the film *For the Bible Tells Me So*](#) for additional guidance on teaching an advocacy training.

Faith traditions challenge believers to reach out to those in need.

Chris Glaser



“ Throughout this curriculum, there will be opportunities for participants to consult their own hearts and minds in a moment of silent meditation or reflection.



CONTACT US

Please get in touch with us if you have questions, comments, concerns or just to let us know that you are using this curriculum. We are always open to suggestions and warmly invite continued dialogue.

**Religion & Faith Program
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Checklist of materials

- Paper (for you and participants)
- Pens or pencils
- Optional: flipchart or Power-Point
- Optional: water, refreshments
- Optional: nametags
- Dramatic readings for readers
- Participant Handbooks
- HRC signup sheet
- Requested HRC material
- Out In Scripture brochure
- [Living Openly in Your Place of Worship](#)

Reminders for closing

- Collect and return signup sheets (HRC's Religion and Faith Program).
- Let us know your questions and concerns and those of participants. Our contact information is below.
- Please report on the event and encourage participants to do so as well on our "[Share Your Story](#)" webpage.

STEP ONE

e



The stories.

- Prayer and initial questions (10 minutes)
- Dramatic Reading A and discussion (15 minutes)
- “Gender Identity and You” (15 minutes)
- “Developing a Vocabulary around Transgender Issues” and discussion (40 minutes)
- Optional if you have at least 15 minutes additional time:
Dramatic Reading B: “The Blessing of Being Inclusive”

PURPOSE:

Explain the need for transgender justice, introduce the curriculum, begin the process of personalizing the transgender experience and build a better understanding of transgender concepts.

Either use the [recording provided](#) or ask for 10 volunteers to agree to present the introductions and excerpts from the assembled essays in [Dramatic Readings A](#) and [B](#) if time permits.

Leader(s) begin by welcoming everyone to *Gender Identity and Our Faith Communities: A Congregational Guide toward Transgender Advocacy*.

Consider offering a brief prayer to help signal a respectful tone.

To set the mindset of the gathering to advocate for transgender justice, ask participants what challenges they believe transgender people face. List these on a flipchart or PowerPoint. Make sure the following points are made:

- **Being and becoming themselves**
- **Losing family, friends or colleagues who are non-accepting**
- **Risking violent attack**
- **Being welcomed in their communities and congregations**
- **Paying the financial costs of transition**
- **Losing employment and career opportunities as a result of transition**

Ask what in participants' faith traditions challenges their congregations to be concerned about transgender justice. Sample list (you may include those not named as you proceed):

- **“Love thy neighbor.”**
- **“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?”**
- **“As much as you do it to the least of these, you have done it so to me.”**
- **“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”**
- **“If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together.”**
- **“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”**

When you begin it will be very effective to tell a little of your own story by way of introduction. Try to keep your remarks two-to- three minutes in length as there is much to cover. (Because making the decision to transition is so momentous in a person's life, it will be tempting to talk at length about your own experience or, conversely, to avoid mentioning it altogether. We encourage you to practice what you will say in advance of the training).

Explain the purpose and focus of this curriculum using the material in the [introduction](#).

Explain that the [sources of the curriculum](#) are the essays available on the website, written from Christian, Jewish and Muslim perspectives.

Introduce other leaders, if any and any government, religious or advocacy leaders who are present. (This is not just to honor their leadership, but to let attendees know of the possible resources available.)

Describe briefly the [limited focus](#) of the curriculum as explained in the Introduction. Add that the breadth of the topic means that there may be unanswered questions or unfinished business at the end of your time together.

Review the guidelines in the section of the Introduction titled “[Planning Your Time.](#)”

Then review the three steps of the outline on a visual aid at the front of the room. Include the time frames of each step: Step One (80 minutes), Step Two (40 minutes), Step Three (35 minutes).

Explain that there will be a 10 minute break after Step One and another 10 minute break after Step Two.

Proceed with the Dramatic Reading A and either have the handout prepared for readers or [use recording.](#)

DRAMATIC READING A

“Our Stories: A Dramatic Reading”

[Link to recording](#)



Invite participants to take part in a [brief silence of 30 seconds or so](#) to consider their own answers to the question, “**What do the transgender individuals represented by these comments — either directly or indirectly — have in common?**”

List them by word or phrase as named on a flipchart or PowerPoint.

Sample list (words or phrases are highlighted that could be listed):

- Knowing themselves to be **different from** their **assigned genders** at an early age
- Lonely, homeless, **no one to talk to**
- **Misunderstood** or rejected by parents or family
- **Inner certainty** of their true gender identity
- **Pressured to fulfill gender expectations**
- **Resistance to wearing clothing expected** of their assigned gender
- **Shame of their bodies’ development** that contradicted what they knew to be their gender

TIME CHECK

You want to be sure you have a full 40 minutes for “**Developing a Vocabulary around Transgender Issues.**” If you are running out of time, skip “**Gender Identity and You**” and go straight to “**Developing a Vocabulary around Transgender Issues.**”

GENDER IDENTITY & YOU:

Break the gathering into groups of three and ask them to discuss the questions listed in their handbook under “[Gender Identity and You](#).” They do not all need to be answered, nor do they have to be answered in order. Give eight minutes for this conversation, alerting them when they have four minutes remaining.

- Can you remember a time when you were reprimanded for behavior that was perceived as “gender inappropriate?” What did the experience feel like? What was your response?
- Do you see in yourself both male and female traits?
- Have you become more open to traits of the “opposite” sex in yourself as you have become older? Or were you more open at earlier stages of your life?
- What role has your faith or spirituality played in your understanding of gender?

In the plenary discussion, invite participants to share briefly any moments of insight they may have had as they talked about these questions. The goal here is not to get everyone to be vocal — only those who may have enjoyed a profound insight. Invite them to write about these questions and on their own experience of gender after the training is completed.

As a final reflection, present the quote of transgender activist and author Patrick Califia, presented in Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla’s essay:

“Who would you be if you had never been punished for gender inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What would happen if we all helped each other to manifest our most beautiful, sexy, intelligent, creative and adventurous inner selves, instead of cooperating to suppress them?”

For further reading:

See Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla’s essay, “[How I Met the Tumtum: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology for All Genders](#)”

Take a brief moment to let participants consider this in terms of their own lives. Exploration of gender conformity can be an intense experience for some participants and the leader should be prepared to give time for participants to speak if they feel so compelled.



REVIEW THIS ESSAY:

“DEVELOPING A VOCABULARY AROUND TRANSGENDER ISSUES”

Spend a few minutes explaining why our definitions are in flux, as described by Rev. Allyson Robinson in the essay “Developing a Vocabulary Around Transgender Issues.” Ask participants to think about how their own concepts of gender have changed from their youth until now. What larger cultural shifts have occurred around our idea of gender? Ask participants to think about what difference it makes if transgender people are defining their experience rather than others doing so for them. Why is this important?

Review each term but stop for questions as they arise. You may also wish to list the terms (not their definitions) in advance on a flipchart or PowerPoint. Feel free to be selective about which terms you address, given time constraints.

Place a special emphasis on “gender expression” by explaining the liberation transgender people bring to each of us to express our full range of gender attributes. Point out that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, as well as heterosexual women and men all benefit by the freedom from gender conformity implicit in the transgender movement.

Ask if there are other terms they’ve wondered about. **Then proceed to Step Two.**

OPTIONAL EXERCISE

[If time permits (~15 min) play recording of:]

DRAMATIC READING B

“The Blessing of Being Inclusive”

Or, ask preassigned readers to read each part. This reading will set the stage for *Step Two: Gender Identity and Faith*.



Provide participants with a 10 minute break before beginning Step Two.

“For me, it’s as basic as reading in the scriptures that **God is love.**”

Margaret Blankers
([read the essay](#))

STEP TWO



Gender identity and faith.

“ The Shabbat morning I returned I did what I often did — I read the Torah in the morning service. By that time I had been living as a woman for six weeks and my confidence had grown exponentially. I entered the sanctuary with confidence, wearing an ivory silk sweater and black skirt, quietly took my place in the crowd and when the time came ascended the bima to read the Torah.

Dana Beyer, M.D.
[\(read the essay\)](#)

PURPOSE:

To introduce the relationship between gender identity and faith traditions and to consider spiritual gifts of transgender people. There is more material here than you can cover in 40 minutes. We have therefore given you three options for your discussion.

Read through all three options below in advance of the training and decide whether you will focus on [Option A: The Bible](#); [Option B: Jewish Sacred Texts Outside the Bible](#) or [Option C: Welcoming the Spiritual Gifts of Transgender People](#) based on what makes most sense for your community. You always have the choice of using two options if you think you have time or if you shorten one or both of the ones you select.

Explain to the group why you chose the option you did and encourage them to read and consider the other options on their own. At the end of Step Two are some suggestions for future use of this material that you may wish to raise with your group if they seem interested in exploring these other options further.

Option A: The Bible

Explain that, in 1996, the Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson became the first minister in a mainstream Protestant denomination to transition from one gender to another and retain her ordination. She had to answer a number of biblical and theological questions. Present her answer to one question having to do with God creating us “male and female.”

“ That God creates us male and female is, to me, a joyful expression of our wonderful differences and the real pleasure that is ours in exploring the “otherness” in God’s creation. Of course male and female have often been used to express different aspects of a wholeness, one that can only truly come together in God. I believe that maleness and femaleness are qualities that are part of all of us, part of our deeper nature. This isn’t just romantic gibberish, for it is a fact that early in development the embryo contains the potential for becoming either female or male.

With the influence of critical hormonal events, the embryo embarks on its development to ultimately become a man or a woman. It is as if, at one time, gender was not a “like” and “unlike” dimension, but an expression of wholeness that became lost as we developed in our male or female potential.

I think that it is also interesting to note that, late in the lifecycle, we lose many of the characteristics that differentiate us as male or female. Women tend to lose their graceful curves and begin to grow facial hair. Men become much softer and even can experience some measurable breast development. It is almost as if our differentiation is a temporary physical and spiritual condition which God corrects in due time.

For further reading:

See Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson's essay, [“Transitioning While Ordained”](#)

Invite participants to turn to **“Gender Identity and the Bible”** and highlight the following points that are in bold on the handout:

- In the unity of spiritual community there is no longer male and female. (Galatians 3:28)
- Male and female are complementary features in the image of God in which we were made, thus complementary features in each human being. (Genesis 1:27)
- In the spiritual union of marriage, male and female become one flesh. (Matthew 19:6)
- Jesus implies that the distinctions of male and female do not exist in the life to come. (Luke 20:35-36)

Point out the paragraph in **“Gender Identity and the Bible”** that immediately follows the sub-heading **“The Lord Looks on the Heart.”** Read Deuteronomy 22:5 and 23:1 below. (You could also project them on a flipchart or PowerPoint as you read.)

DEUTERONOMY 22:5

A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent [against custom] to the Lord your God.

DEUTERONOMY 23:1

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

Explain that these are used as “clobber” passages against transgender people and that the first calls cross-dressing uncustomary (the Hebrew word translated “abhorrent”) and the second opposes entrance to worship of any male whose genitals are damaged or missing.

Ask participants what they think of these verses and if they can think of any scriptures or religious concepts that would counter their effect.

Here is a list of possible scriptures and religious concepts:

- God welcomed eunuchs into the Temple, according to the prophet Isaiah.
- Jesus spoke positively of eunuchs in his comments on divorce.
- The apostle Paul, a primary interpreter in Christian scriptures of Jesus’ legacy, said “there is no longer male and female” in Christ Jesus — in other words, in spiritual community.
- The evangelist Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch in Acts.
- God looks on the heart rather than externals.
- Compassion, fostered by every religion, would anticipate understanding, care and support of people regardless of clothing, physiology or gender identity.

Feel free to supply any of these that are not mentioned.

Option B: Jewish Sacred Texts Outside the Bible

Use the [recording available](#), or prepare seven readers to present [Dramatic Reading C: “Gender Identity and Jewish Tradition.”](#) Discover and review the pronunciation of the unfamiliar words in the text with the readers. Tell them it is not necessary to cite references in parentheses.

Before the reading presentation, have participants turn to [“Gender Identity and Jewish Traditions”](#) and give participants the option to read along silently as the recording or the readers present parts of the paper.

DRAMATIC READING C

“Gender Identity & the Jewish Tradition”

[\[Link to recording\]](#)



After the reading, review the words mentioned by Rabbi Kukla, using a flipchart or PowerPoint. All of these words are found in the reading in the handbook.

- **Androgynos** – androgynous, having male and female characteristics; said of Adam in the Mishna Bikkurum

When highlighting this word, explain that some Jewish interpretations of taking a rib from Adam meant taking a side of the first to create the second human creature. Adam was understood as “androgynos.”

- **Tumtum** – neither male nor female; according to Rabbi Yose in Mishna Bikkurim 4:5, “sometimes a man and sometimes a woman”
- **Tumtumim** – plural of tumtum, said of Abraham and Sarah, who transitioned into their genders according to a radical claim that appears *only* in the Babylonian Talmud
- **Zakhar** – male
- **Nekevah** – female
- **Saris** – born male but later develops female traits
- **Ayloni** – born female but later develops male traits

Ask participants what terms in Step Two parallel *androgynos* and *tumtum*:

- intersex
- bigender
- cross-dresser
- gender variant
- transgender (explaining this can be used as the umbrella term for all gender variant individuals)

Ask what terms in Step One parallel saris and alyoni:

- transgender
- transsexual
- transman
- transwoman

Ask if there are any surprises in Rabbi Kukla's essay.

Any questions?

Option C: Welcoming the Spiritual Gifts of Transgender People

[All readings for this option are available as [audio recordings](#).]

Explain that in small groups, participants will consider four distinct gifts that transgender people may bring to a spiritual community. Each group will be given a series of quotes from the essays. They can either read these as a group or make use of the recording.

1. [Freedom from gender expectations](#)
2. [A broader understanding of God](#)
3. [Openness to ambiguity](#)
4. [Empathy for others](#)

For these ideas, we are indebted to Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's essay, "[Seven Reasons Why Congregations Should Embrace Their Transgender Members](#)," as well as all the essays that mention these gifts.

Divide the gathering into four groups. It will save time if the groups are pre-assigned by name tags or divided by location in the assembly. (Numbering off takes time.) If the group is large, you may want eight groups or 12 groups.

Direct each group to one of Gifts 1-4 in the handbook.

Explain they will have 15 minutes to discuss. At the end of the 15 minutes, invite groups to finish their sentences and rejoin the whole gathering.

Review the four gifts that different groups discussed, highlighting them on PowerPoint or flipchart:

THE GIFTS OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Freedom from Gender Expectations

A Broader View of God

Openness to Ambiguity

Empathy for Others

Display the questions asked of each group by the same method:

- How do transgender people affect your attitudes about gender expectations?
- How might the transgender experience inform your understanding of God/the Divine?
- What advantages come with ambiguity around gender?
- How do you empathize with the transgender community?

Ask the leader of each group to report briefly on the dialogue around the question assigned to them. After all group leaders have reported, ask if anyone from any of the groups has anything to add. Within your time constraints, ask if anyone has anything to say about another group's question.

Suggestions for further use of material:

Organize a “Transgender and the Bible” course using material found in additional resources. In particular:

- Consider using [Option A: The Bible](#) as a launching pad to explore the educational series developed by the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce's Institute for Welcoming Resources Transgender curriculum, *transACTION: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*. <http://www.welcomingresources.org/>
- Consider using [Option B: Jewish Sacred Texts Outside the Bible](#) as an introduction to the resource, “**TransText: Exploring Gender in Jewish Sacred Texts**” by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla and Rabbi Rueben Zellmen. www.jewishmosaic.org/verses/about.
- Plan three seasonal Bible study meetings that explore the Bible and transgender issues using HRC's new seasonal guide: *Out In Season: Scripture through Transgender Eyes*. www.hrc.org/scripture. [Option C: The Bible](#) can serve as a grounding exercise for this discussion.

Organize a meeting with congregational members to discuss how welcoming your congregation is to transgender people. Use [Option C: Welcoming the Spiritual Gifts of Transgender People](#) in conjunction with [Dramatic Reading B: “The Gift of Being Inclusive”](#) from Step One to begin such a discussion.

“ Gender rigidity affects all of us, even if we are not transgender... the belief that there are only two ways to be human leads to multiple types of violence and oppression. It limits and circumscribes everyone's potential.

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla
([read the essay](#))



Rev. Elise Elrod, discussing scripture.

STEP THREE



A call for justice.

“ It is high time for congregations to study gender issues, to wake up to the importance of noticing and embracing their transgender members and to reach out in ministry with the transgender community as a whole.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Ph.D.
([read the essay](#))

PURPOSE:

Encourage advocacy for the rights of transgender people.

To prepare in advance for this section, the trainer should learn more about the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) and hate crimes legislation. We encourage trainers to know the status of local legislation in their area. The HRC website can help.

Have participants turn to the [“Litany for Justice”](#) in the handbook. Determine whether you will read the regular text or whether you will pre-assign a reader. Each line in bold print is a unison response by the participants.

Lead the group in listing calls for justice in the “Litany for Justice.” It is not necessary to list everything, but those of particular importance are bolded:

- Let go of fear
- Let go of anger
- Open ourselves
- Study gender and sex
- Reclaim the transgender experiences in our faith traditions and in history
- Struggle against mistaken ideologies, false scientific assumptions, bigotry
- **Tell my own story**
- **Preach**
- **Teach**
- **Organize**
- Sensitize people through trainings
- **Establish policies that welcome transgender people**
- **Consecrate transgender clergy**
- Offer concrete sustenance and support
- **Oppose employment discrimination**
- **Oppose healthcare discrimination**
- Transform oppressive systems

[Click to find out more about ENDA](#)



[Click for more info about Hate Crimes Legislation](#)



[Click to find out about your community](#)



Explain: “These are actions we can take to *practice what we pray*. To paraphrase the great spiritual and political leader Gandhi, “We must *become* the change we seek.””

“But notice there are some things on this list we can only achieve together organizing alongside transgender people, meeting with religious leaders and elected officials. One of the concrete things we can do together is to demonstrate to our elected officials the need for passage of federal legislation such as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act before Congress and protection for Hate Crimes.”

Ask: “Those of us who have met with either political or religious leaders to affect policy, can you tell us please what makes such encounters productive?”

Reinforce all good ideas and mention a few listed in “Communicating with Elected Representatives or Religious Leaders.

Have them turn to that part in the handbook and review point by point

Then point out: “All of the points listed here hold for testifying at a hearing of elected or appointed officials or religious leaders, except you will have less time. You may be given as little as a minute to speak, but much can be said in a minute.”

Add: “Given the time granted in testifying to a hearing, you might be able to offer one or two talking points. Be prepared with a dozen talking points to avoid repeating a previous speaker’s testimony.”

Remind them: “Merely your presence at a hearing registers the importance of the issue being considered. You may be given the option of signing an attendance card and indicating your position without having to testify.”

Say: “Many of the characteristics of a one-on-one meeting apply to writing a letter or sending a postcard or an e-mail. But let me ask you, which of the three do you give greater weight when you’re the receiver?”

Hopefully someone will say “a letter.”

Say: “Absolutely — letters sent through the U.S. mail still have the greatest influence on officials and religious leaders. And letters or postcards or e-mails that are personally written – with personal stories – rather than following a form are more likely to affect them.” Contact HRC’s Religion and Faith program for sample letters.

“Remember, too, that if you write to a chair of a committee, send copies to all members of the committee. If you write to elected or appointed officials or religious leaders, send copies to all members of their staff.”

Say: “Here’s a little homework assignment. Take this home and review it and make a personal pledge to do at least three of the things on the list. This is for your reference only — it is not to be turned in.”

Have them turn to [“My Personal Pledge for Transgender Justice”](#) in their handbook.

Circulate “Human Rights Campaign Religion and Faith Program Signup.”

CONCLUDE

by describing HRC's [Clergy Call for Justice and Equality](#), May 4-5, 2009.

Explain that the Clergy Call is intended to give clergy a chance to advocate for LGBT equality with their local representatives and senators and to talk with other clergy from around the country about the mobilizing work they have done in their communities. Pass out a sign-up sheet (HRC Religion and Faith Program Sign-up) for those who are interested in going or who are willing to commit to help finance their clergy representatives. Plan to be available afterwards to talk with people further about the event.



Blessing Our Advocacy

A note on personal transformation: (The trainer should either read this or paraphrase)

“ Adapting Rev. Drew Phoenix’s sermon, we hear him describe the spiritual experience of transformation to a congregation that witnessed and welcomed his own transition from female to male as their pastor:

The most exciting thing for me is trans-formation, resurrection in the here-and-now! What’s exciting is **our capacity** right now, today, to spiritually grow and morph into the people God created us to be, to the point that even our loved ones do not recognize us anymore!

We **live into that possibility** of trans-formation, even if at first we are scared, while others run in fear and disbelief. And sometimes we hold each other back from trans-formation. Like the disciples, we want to go back to the old life where everything was familiar and not frightening like now. New life is frightening! Transformation can be unsettling!

Please pray with me: **O Holy One, bless our own transformation as advocates for transgender people, that we may speak truth to power, transforming hearts, votes, congregations and constituencies in your love. Amen.** ”

For further reading:
See Rev. Drew Phoenix’s essay, [“Easter Transformation”](#)

DRAMATIC READINGS



The following are three dramatic readings.

The first: [“Our Stories”](#) should be used in Step One.

The second: [“The Blessing of Being Inclusive”](#) is an optional reading with Step One.

The third: [“Gender Identity and Jewish Tradition”](#) is to be used in Step Two, Option A.

Each of these is also available as a [recording](#).

DRAMATIC READING A

“Our Stories”

[\[Link to recording\]](#)



(Note: Reader 1 and Reader 7 read twice.)

READER 1

In the words of the [Rev. Sarah Carpenter-Vascik](#), a transgender female educator:

The key to understanding conflicts in gender identity is to bear in mind that most individuals never think about their gender — they have no reason to, they’re content with the gender they were assigned at birth and are comfortable with how it does or does not affect their lives. But some begin to question why they don’t feel they fit the gender assigned to them at birth and the gender everyone tells them they are. This may begin as early as five years of age. In short, the transgender child is thinking, “Wait a minute, *this is not who I am*. Why are people saying this to me, *why are they making me do this?*”

READER 2

[Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla](#), a transgender man serving as a rabbi at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco, offers an example of society’s gender expectations:

Gender rigidity affects all of us, even if we are not transgender. Ronnie Paris Jr., a three-year-old boy, was beaten to death by his father in 2005 for not acting “masculine” enough. Ronnie’s story illustrates the fact that the belief that there are only two ways to be human leads to multiple types of violence and oppression. It limits and circumscribes everyone’s potential.

READER 3

[Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott](#), a retired professor from Patterson College and an author of many books, including one entitled *Omnigender*, gives another example:

We are living at a time when a 15-year-old boy was shot to death for wearing eye shadow and high heels to school and for expressing his attraction to a boy a year younger than himself. (“Mixed Messages,” *The Advocate*, April 8, 2008, pp 29-33.)



READER 1

Again, [Rev. Sarah Carpenter-Vascik](#) explains:

As the child progresses through school, gender expectations become stronger and are only enhanced by pressure from friends and classmates. Failure to live up to these expectations often leads to labels such as “sissy” and quite frequently, more vulgar and obscene nicknames, causing the child to become increasingly despondent and depressed as the internal conflict deepens. For a teenager it would have been, until very recently, almost impossible to find someone qualified to talk about gender identity or to find useful information on the topic, thus making the conflict even more firmly embedded.

This conflict over gender often leads to deep depression and anxiety and an attempt is all too frequently made to suppress these feelings with alcohol and/or substance abuse. When all else fails, many transgender youth believe that suicide presents the only viable option.

READER 4

[Dana Beyer, M.D.](#), a transgender woman and retired surgeon turned politician, tells of her experience growing up in a yeshiva:

Judaism is a religion that can be both welcoming and fear-inducing, simultaneously. As a child in a yeshiva or Jewish day school, where I spent ten hours or more daily learning my math, chemistry and scripture, I felt both at home and fearful that I would be struck dead at any minute.

There is a morning prayer still recited by orthodox men and, because I was in an orthodox school, I was obligated to say it as well. It goes, “Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, king of the universe, who has not made me a woman.” I can best describe my state at that moment of recitation as swallowing crushed glass. And I could not share this with any rabbi or other teacher, because I would literally have been crushed by the system. Being the smart little boy I’m told I was, I just kept my mouth shut.

READER 5

[Rayees Shah](#), a transgender male Muslim describes his upbringing at home and at a Catholic school in Pakistan:

My earliest memories are of my mother reminding me to speak like a girl. When I first started to talk I somehow preferred to speak in the male gender, because Urdu, my native language, is gender specific. By the time I was seven I had learned three important lessons. In no particular order, I learned that I was different because I knew with an innate certainty that I was a boy, yet could not persuade those around me to recognize this reality and instead suffered punishing consequences when I tried. I tried everything from earnest childish arguments that I could never strengthen with proof to grand tantrums when I rebelled against wearing frilly frocks. Nothing worked! Eventually, I simply evolved into a tomboy — I gave up the arguments and the attempts at reasoning. I remained a girl and acted at every opportunity like a boy.



Though Muslim, I attended a Catholic school. In sixth grade I cajoled my mother into bringing me a pair of Western boots from one of my parents various foreign trips. So on my birthday, I wore my favorite denim jacket and my new boots to school; the one day a student was allowed to be out of uniform.

Just my luck that the headmistress of the middle school decided to take a random tour of the classrooms that particular day! Sister Mary was not one given to extravagant displays of emotion, so that one sharply lifted eyebrow provided a swift disclosure of the extent of her disapproval. Calmly, she informed me I was to remain within the confines of the classroom for the rest of the day, including recess and leave only to go straight home, because she didn't want a little boy running around in the all girls' school grounds. This became a defining theme for much of my later life. Blessedly, I looked like a boy if I dressed like one and I exploited this advantage to its full extent as I grew up.

READER 6

[Rev. Drew Phoenix](#), a transgender male pastor, transitioned while serving St. John's United Methodist Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He continues to pastor this church:

I spent the first 46 years of my life homeless. I am talking about a kind of homelessness born of a disconnect between my internal, spiritual self and my physical, external self. I was born transgender. It is as if "I," my spirit, had no place to reside. Friends and family describe me before I physically transitioned as not being fully present, as not showing up completely.

From as early as age 4 and 5, I attempted to communicate this disconnect to my parents. I insisted that I was a boy, even though the doctor who had delivered me had assigned my sex as female. My assigned sex did not match my true gender identity of male. I felt like a boy, acted like a boy, dressed like a boy and wanted to hang out with the boys.

So it was very difficult when I reached puberty to be pressured by family, friends, church and community to conform, to dress and act, like a female. At that time there was little knowledge about gender identity and certainly no available medical expertise to help me and my family understand the spectrum and complexity of gender identity. And, now we understand that the God in whose image we are created, is both and at once, female and male, encompassing the entire spectrum of what we call "gender." "Let us make humankind in *our* image," God said in Genesis.

READER 7

[Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay](#), a United Methodist pastor, describes her father, a United Church of Christ pastor and social justice advocate:

My father was born in the late 1920's. From an early age he was also much jumbled, because the "not right" in his own sense of being was with him always. While he pursued the boy-child engagements of his culture, he was drawn to the silk and soft of the things that bespoke woman. He had a cache of the sorts of adornments a child born into woman flesh would cherish. He kept them hidden in the dark of his closet, taken out and worn whenever he could get the chance for self expression.

And he was caught by his father. "What sort of sick was this?" he was asked. It was a question familiar to him, because it lived with him every day of his life. What sort of sick, indeed.

World War II found him serving in the Pacific playing his tuba among other things and when he came back, he enrolled in seminary. What better place to muck about with God? What better way to atone for the shame that would not lose its grip?

Along the way, he courted and won the hand of a woman, my mother. She who was beautiful and talented and gracious and who seemed to know the rights and the wrongs and the absences of gray that made life so painful. Perhaps she would keep him safe from himself.

They married and moved to California for seminary. And within the first year of their marriage, she too “caught” him. Far away from home, with young children and expectations for a good life and with no help from a world that seemed not to know or speak of this “not right,” promises were made: never again would my father do this thing. Never again.

And the door was shut. Between them. Between them and this “thing”.

But not within my father. Jessica would not be denied, try as he might.

And always, in my home, there was the presence of an unnamed guest: shame. The unspoken between my parents, the shame they each carried: my father’s for being this oddity and my mother’s for perhaps feeling somehow at fault for it. That shame was in the very air I breathed. I felt it, but could not name it.

READER 8

Margaret Blankers, a Presbyterian lay person, describes her journey when her daughter Sara became Matthew:

As far back as Sara’s grade school days, I can remember the battles we had over the way she dressed. As she grew into a teenager, she usually wore baggy jeans that hid her lovely, young woman’s shape: oversized tee-shirts and shapeless pants. Once she went to a prom wearing a beautiful red dress ... *and* combat boots — making sure a little of the “real” her peeked through, I now suspect.

Finally, about two years ago, it made sense. My beautiful, petite daughter was really my son! At the age of 29, Sara started transitioning into Matthew. From the time she entered puberty, my child felt she was a boy. Looking back, of course, the signs were there — not just in attire and haircuts, but also in emotions, random comments and in the ways Sara expressed herself with others. She had been appalled when she grew breasts, humiliated by her period, hated wearing a bra and ultimately kept shaving her head.

READER 9

Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson, a transgender woman pastor and therapist, describes her process trying to change her name on the roles of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta:

I told them the story of my first experience in Mom’s powder room when I stuffed tissue in my tee-shirt, awed by the vision of myself in the mirror. About how I struggled through adolescence, hung my hopes on my relationship with Sigrid, my wife and despaired shortly after our wedding. I reviewed the years of lying, denial and avoidance, and the great cost in terms of my mental health as well as my family’s well-being. They listened intently at my story of stealing Sigrid’s hormone pills and at getting fed up with a lifetime of mendacity that led to my visits to Baltimore for counseling and finally accepting that I needed to transition.

The raw truth is that I have probably never really known what it is to be male. I have never experienced

as most of my male friends have, the sheer joy and delight of being a male person. I recoiled from my male puberty and hid from any participation in boyish rituals of passage into manhood. I don't really know what it is like to have fun dating girls or women as a man. It was always an awkward and painful experience I avoided as much as possible.

Likewise, I will also never really know what it is to be female. I didn't get to experience the friendship of young girls, nor the mystery of menarche. I will never really know what it is to date boys as a high school or college girl or the joy of emerging womanhood. I will never know what it is to feel the nurturing power of motherhood.

READER 10

Jakob Hero, a transgender man and LGBT activist in Croatia before becoming a seminarian at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, relates his experience:

The biological fact of my female birth sex did not have to dictate the gender performance of the rest of my life, the way I behaved, whom I fell in love with, what I would call myself. Even back when I did not yet look or sound like a man, the internal ontological reality of my identity was male. I did not need facial stubble or a flat chest to dictate that reality. I *already* knew myself to be male. The people who loved me called me by my chosen name and when they spoke of me they used male pronouns, even though it was terribly hard for them to remember to do so, since I did not yet *look or sound* male. They constructed a reality for me in which I was a man, regardless of the “essential” nature of my birth sex. They recognized the real me and eventually I was able to use modern medical technology so that my body could catch up with my identity.

My first attempt to start transitioning was far from successful. After a few sessions with a gender therapist I was judged “not a good candidate.” This therapist was disturbed that I did not perfectly fit the mold of what a transsexual man was *supposed* to be. Among other things, I did not hate myself enough and I would not state that I wanted to be a gender normative heterosexual man post-transition. She said that I would probably never be successful as a man and refused to write the necessary letters that would allow me to start taking hormones and eventually have any of the surgeries available.

READER 7

Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay concludes her description of her father Jessica's story:

We sat in my father's home, the cabin that had been our family's for decades and she shared her story. I was able to hear the decision making process around gender reassignment surgery and the reasons she gave for not pursuing that route. I was able to hear her regrets about the hurts experienced by my mother and her church. I was able to hear her share from her heart the ways that she found amazing kinds of grace by being honest with her life. And oh-so- powerfully, she shared her sense that God had created her in love and with an artistry both challenging and beautiful.

My father Jessica died six months after our open heart sharing. She had a massive heart attack. Her heart broke partially, I believe, after being weakened by the decades of shame that had so long wrapped her. She had become the most real person I had ever met. I miss her desperately, because she knew so well how acceptance can gentle a person into their own skin. And she shared that acceptance lavishly with those she loved. I was such a one. At her funeral was a rainbow throng of people bearing witness to how she helped them see their own amazing grace. She did that for me.

DRAMATIC READING B

“The Blessing of Being Inclusive”

[Link to recording](#)



READER 1

When the [Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson](#) transitioned from male to female, one of the comments she received by a fellow Presbyterian was:

“Her actions and work may help others but the audience is outside the Church.”

In other words, the speaker perceived that transgender people and the need for ministry among them and their families was not an “inside job.” Aside from the fact that most faith traditions encourage reaching outside congregations to serve others and that most congregations need all the members they can get, the following quotes suggest that this is a ministry needed within congregations as much as within the broader community.

READER 2

As [Margaret Blankers](#) declares in “Coming Out Twice,” when her daughter first came out as a lesbian and then transitioned to a son, she needed first, to cut off her relationship with her non-accepting church, then, after an absence, to find a congregation that would give her the support she needed:

I felt I was at the edge of the abyss: We could either reject our daughter and continue embracing God or reject God and accept our daughter. We loved her, so we did the latter. We resigned from everything at church and never looked back, except to grieve.

We didn’t know where to find support in the Christian community. We assumed our “church days” were over. My heart had been broken by the skewed beliefs about Christ’s love that had been foisted on me — and by what seemed terribly superficial. Where was God in all this? How could a loving, Christ-centered church recoil from us and from our child?

Must I have the “church’s” blessing to accept that my child is loved by God? No and I got along for several years unattached to any organized religion. But my cup was empty and I needed to discover who God really is: For me, it’s as basic as reading in the Scriptures that “God is love.” God is the quintessential meaning of love, the perfect model for us to follow of acceptance, inclusion and welcome.

READER 3

And in his synagogue, [Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla](#) had this experience after transitioning from female to male:

On Kol Nidre I delivered a sermon at my synagogue on the power of diversity. Afterwards, in the swirling crowd, I felt someone tug at my jacket. I turned around to find a nine-year old boy in lavender shiny ‘Powerpuffs’ sneakers. “I really liked your sermon,” he whispered before disappearing into the crowd. Later, his mom told me that he had been hassled about his shoes at school all week, but after hearing my sermon he had decided to keep wearing them. I don’t really think it was my words that had an impact on him, but the visual power of a gender non-conforming rabbi on the bimah. It took years of struggle by feminist, gay and trans activists in previous generations to allow that moment to happen.

READER 4

After an article in the local paper about her attempt to maintain her standing as a minister in the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta while transitioning, [Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson](#) shared this story:

I received dozens of notes, letters and phone calls — most of them supportive — in the weeks following the article’s publication. Perhaps the most moving contact was from an old woman who wanted to meet me for breakfast. She explained that she had, many years before, gone through a “sex change” in Baltimore and had married, her husband completely unaware of her history. They had lived a lifetime together. After he died she had moved into a retirement home next to a Presbyterian church where she had been attending for many years, often volunteering her musical skills to accompany a women’s meeting or a Sunday school class. But she had never joined the church. When I asked her why, her eyes dropped to the floor and she said that she felt unworthy because of her “sex change” operation. “When I saw the article about you, about the minister who was a transsexual, I was overjoyed,” she exclaimed, tears in the corners of her eyes. I was stunned, overwhelmed with the decades of brokenness this beautiful old woman had endured. And it wasn’t her brokenness — it was the church’s.

READER 5

[Dana Beyer](#) recounts the remarkable acceptance of her congregation when she returned as female:

The Shabbat morning I returned I did what I often did — I read the Torah in the morning service. By that time I had been living as a woman for six weeks and my confidence had grown exponentially. I entered the sanctuary with confidence, wearing an ivory silk sweater and black skirt, quietly took my place in the crowd and when the time came ascended the bima to read the Torah.

Once I got going, I was back in the groove as one of the best in the business, having been doing this service for 42 years. Most people knew who I was and the congratulations came for my work and my presentation when I returned to the crowd. The most memorable comment was, “As long as you keep reading Torah, I couldn’t care less what sex you are!”

End of dramatic reading

DRAMATIC READING C

“Gender Identity and Jewish Tradition”
by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

[\[Link to recording\]](#)



READER 1

Elliot Rose Kukla was ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles in 2006 and trained in chaplaincy at the University of California Medical Center (UCSF) in 2007. In his essay, “How I Met the Tumtum,” he quotes the ancient Jewish text, the Mishnah:

Rabbi Yose says: ‘An *androgynos* — *he* is a created being of *her* own.’ The Sages could not decide if the *androgynos* is a man or a woman. But this is not true of a *tumtum*, who is sometimes a man and sometimes a woman. - **Mishna Bikkurim 4:5**

READER 2

The first time I met the *tumtum* I was 20 years old and studying in an orthodox yeshiva. I was new to religious Judaism and I was falling in love with traditional texts fast and hard. I was captivated by the mysterious square Hebrew letters and the beautifully convoluted logic of the ancient rabbis. In a class on the Mishna, the earliest layer of Jewish oral tradition, I found a startling text buried in a sheaf of handouts. The topic was the rules governing someone who takes an ascetic vow. The rabbis said this vow will be valid if and *only if*, a son is born to him. However, if the baby turns out to be a daughter, a *tumtum* or an *androgynos*, he is not bound by this vow (Mishna Nazir 2:7).

READER 3

As soon as I read this perplexing text I called over my teacher and excitedly asked her: “Who is this *tumtum*?” “Oh,” she answered, “The *tumtum* is a mythical beast that is neither male nor female — kind of like a unicorn — that our Sages invented in order to explore the limits of the law.” Even though I knew next to nothing about Jewish texts and traditions, I had a feeling that my learned teacher might be wrong. I instantly identified with the *tumtum*. I had spent a lifetime feeling homeless and adrift between the modern categories of “male” and “female.” When I met the *tumtum*, I finally came home.

READER 4

The rabbis of the Jewish sacred text, the Mishna, who lived in the first two centuries of the Common Era, identify at least four possible genders/sexes: the *zakhar* (male) and the *nekevah* (female), as well as

two sexes that are neither male nor female: the *tumtum* and the *androgynos*. They also had two other categories for gender identity that don't appear at birth, but develop later in life. The *saris* is born male but later develops female traits; the *ayloni* is born female, but later develops male traits.

READER 5

All these genders appear frequently in classical Jewish texts: the Mishna, the Tosefta, the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, midrash and halacha. The *tumtum* appears 17 times in the Mishna; 23 times in the Tosefta; 119 times in the Babylonian Talmud; 22 times in the Jerusalem Talmud and hundreds of times in midrash, commentaries and halacha. The *androgynos* appears 21 times in the Mishna; 19 times in the Tosefta 109 times in the Babylonian Talmud and countless times in midrash and halacha. And yet gender diversity is seldom discussed as an integral part of Jewish sacred texts or as a spiritual resource of our tradition.

READER 6

The midrash, for example, teaches that Adam, the first human being, was an *androgynos* (Bereshit Rabah 8). In the Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 64a) the radical claim is made that both the first Jews, Abraham and Sarah, were actually *tumtumim* who later transitioned genders to become male and female. According to some of the most influential texts of our tradition, the first human being and the first Jews were gender nonconforming people!

READER 7

The reason that my first Mishna teacher told me that the tumtum was a mythical creature is because most modern readers approach Jewish sacred texts with the presumption of finding a system of binary gender that is virtually identical to today's mainstream understanding that there are two (and only two) opposite sexes. According to this view the tumtum must be either a mythical creature or a statistical aberration.

End of dramatic reading.

GENDER IDENTITY & OUR FAITH COMMUNITIES PARTICIPANT HANDBOOK



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[attached at end of PDF]

THE FOLLOWING EXERCISES

and articles are intended to accompany the curriculum. You will not have an opportunity to work through all of these during the three-hour training. (See guidelines in the curriculum for making decisions about which items to use.) We believe, however, that the material here will be useful to participants and encourage advocacy trainers to make the entire handbook available for each participant.

GENDER IDENTITY AND YOU for use with Step One

In groups of three, respond to any or all of these questions. It is not necessary to answer them in order. You have ten minutes.

1. Can you remember a time when you were reprimanded for behavior that was perceived as “gender inappropriate?” What did the experience feel like? What was your response?
2. Do you see both male and female traits in yourself? Explain.
3. Have you become more open to traits of the “opposite” sex in yourself as you have become older? Or were you more open at earlier stages of your life?
4. What role has your faith or spirituality played in your understanding of gender?

DEVELOPING A VOCABULARY AROUND TRANSGENDER ISSUES for use with Step One

By Rev. Allyson Robinson

The terminology used to describe the transgender experience — and, more generally, all matters of gender — is in a state of flux. There are many reasons for this fluidity, but two are particularly relevant. First, for the last century or so, the norms and values associated with gender in western culture have been under deep scrutiny — think, for example, of the ways in which the roles and rights of women have changed during that period. New ways of thinking about gender have required new words with which to talk about it.

Second, transgender people themselves are just now becoming empowered as a community to the point that *their own ways* of describing their experience are being given priority over the descriptions of others (often in the medical, psychological, or sociological fields). The rights of individuals and communities to define themselves are fundamental, and denying them is a powerful weapon of oppression. As more and more transgender people claim those rights, and more and more non-transgender people acknowledge them, the vocabulary we use to speak about the transgender experience will continue to be refined.

Some will undoubtedly see all of this attention given to appropriate verbiage as paying homage to the gods of “political correctness.” In the context of these training materials, however, it is perhaps better to see it as a detailed application of the Golden Rule, a basic moral value contained within nearly every human faith tradition that states, “Treat others as you yourself would want to be treated.” Try to put yourself in the place of those for whom you are learning to advocate. Do you want your own right to self-identify respected by others? Do you value your own right to choose the name others call you, the pronouns they use to speak about you, and the terms with which your experience of life is discussed? *How would you feel if those rights were violated?*

The following list of terms is adapted from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)’s Media Reference Guide — [Transgender Glossary of Terms](#). Trans Vocabulary was developed through collaboration between HRC and GLAAD.

GENERAL TERMINOLOGY

SEX - The classification of people as male or female. At birth, infants are assigned a sex based on a combination of bodily characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs and genitals.

GENDER IDENTITY - One's internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or a boy or girl). For transgender people, their birth-assigned sex and their own internal sense of gender identity do not match.

GENDER EXPRESSION - External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through “masculine,” “feminine” or gender variant behavior, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION - Describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic, emotional and/or spiritual attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. For example, a man who becomes a woman and is attracted to other women would be identified as a lesbian.

TRANSGENDER-SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

TRANSGENDER - An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term may include but is not limited to: transsexuals, cross-dressers and other gender-variant people. Transgender people may identify as: Trans man or female-to-male (FTM), Trans woman or male-to-female (MTF), genderqueer, bi-gender androgynous or gender variant. Use the descriptive term (transgender, transsexual, cross-dresser, trans man, trans woman, genderqueer, etc.) preferred by the individual. Transgender people may or may not choose to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically.

TRANSSEXUAL (also, TRANSEXUAL) - An older term which originated in the medical and psychological communities. Many transgender people prefer the term “transgender” to “transsexual.” Some transsexual people still prefer to use the term to describe themselves. However, unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term and many transgender people do not identify as transsexual. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

TRANSVESTITE - Derogatory, see Cross-Dressing

TRANSITION - Altering one's birth sex is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transition includes some or all of the following cultural, legal and medical adjustments: telling one's family, friends and/or co-workers; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) some form of surgical alteration.

SEX REASSIGNMENT SURGERY (SRS) - Refers to surgical alteration and is only one small part of transition (see Transition above). Preferred term to “sex change operation.” Not all transgender people choose to or can afford to have SRS.

CROSS-DRESSING - To occasionally wear clothes traditionally associated with people of the other sex. Cross-dressers are usually comfortable with the sex they were assigned at birth and do not wish to change it. “Cross-dresser” should NOT be used to describe someone who has transitioned to live full-time as the other sex or who intends to do so in the future. Cross-dressing is a form of gender expression and is not necessarily tied to erotic activity. Cross-dressing is not indicative of sexual orientation.

GENDER-VARIANT (also, GENDERQUEER) - An umbrella term for gender identities other than man and woman. People who identify as gender variant or genderqueer may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.

GENDER IDENTITY DISORDER (GID) - A controversial mental health diagnosis (found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Revision IV or DSM-IV) given to transgender and other gender-variant people. Because it labels people as “disordered,” Gender Identity Disorder is often considered offensive. The diagnosis is frequently given to children who don't conform to expected gender norms in terms of dress, play or behavior. Such children are often subjected to intense psychotherapy, behavior modification and/or institutionalization. Replaces the outdated term “gender dysphoria.”

INTERSEX - Describing a person whose biological sex is ambiguous. There are many genetic, hormonal or anatomical variations which make a person's sex ambiguous (i.e., Klinefelter Syndrome, Adrenal Hyperplasia). Parents and medical professionals usually assign intersex infants a sex and perform surgical operations to conform the infant's body to that assignment. This practice has become increasingly controversial as intersex adults are speaking out against the practice, accusing doctors of genital mutilation.

TRANSGENDER TERMINOLOGY TO AVOID **PROBLEMATIC TERMINOLOGY**

PROBLEMATIC: “transgenders,” “a transgender”

PREFERRED: “transgender people,” “a transgender person”

Transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. Do not say, “Tony is a transgender,” or “The parade included many transgenders.” Instead say, “Tony is a transgender person,” or “The parade included many transgender people.”

PROBLEMATIC: “transgendered”
PREFERRED: “transgender”

The word transgender never needs the extraneous “ed” at the end of the word. In fact, such a construction is grammatically incorrect. Only verbs can be transformed into participles by adding “-ed” to the end of the word and transgender is an adjective, not a verb.

PROBLEMATIC: “sex change,” “pre-operative,” “post-operative”
PREFERRED: “transition”

Referring to a sex change operation or using terms such as pre- or post-operative, inaccurately suggests that one must have surgery in order to truly change one's sex.

PROBLEMATIC: “hermaphrodite”
PREFERRED: “intersex person”

The word “hermaphrodite” is an outdated, stigmatizing and misleading word, usually used to sensationalize intersex people.

DEFAMATORY TERMINOLOGY

DEFAMATORY: “deceptive,” “fooling,” “pretending,” “posing,” or “masquerading”

Gender identity is an integral part of a person's identity. Please do not characterize transgender people as “deceptive,” as “fooling” other people or as “pretending” to be, “posing” or “masquerading” as a man or a woman. Such descriptions are extremely insulting.

DEFAMATORY: “she-male,” “he-she,” “it,” “trannie,” “tranny,” “gender-bender”

These words only serve to dehumanize transgender people and should not be used.

GENDER IDENTITY AND THE BIBLE: JEWISH & CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES for use with Step Two, Option A

Rev. Chris Glaser

Scripture is so often used against a new idea or experience that progressive people often feel forced to take a defensive posture toward it. But the Bible records the reflections of people across millennia applying their faith to a myriad of new ideas and experiences. These faithful people model for us how we may respond with justice, compassion, and welcome to transgender people. This brief paper suggests possible ways to begin the conversation in the context of biblical themes.

“No Longer Male and Female”

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28).

The writer of this passage, the apostle Paul — himself a Jewish Christian free male — neither denies nor diminishes various identities, but affirms here that unity in spiritual community trumps cultural, ethnic, economic, and gender divisions — for all are one.

Those in our own time who do not fit absolutely into the categories of male and female remind their congregations to practice what they proclaim: that our spiritual unity with one another and with God transcends matters of gender identity and expression.

Those who know themselves as transgender reveal that there is a spectrum that stretches between the experiences of male and female, a spectrum of gender identity. Positive references to “eunuch” in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures may be said to resemble this experience, but, more explicitly, the Mishna and Talmud (the earliest Jewish law and folklore) have terms for differently gendered individuals between male and female.

“Male and Female ... One Flesh”

Interpreting the second creation story in Genesis, chapter two, the Bereshit Rabah, a midrashic text, suggests that the first human creature (“adam”) was androgynous, and the reference to taking a rib is more accurately understood as taking a side of the first to create the second human creature. Thus male and female come from one flesh. Remembering that “male and female” are complementary features in the imago dei (the “image of God” in which human beings were created in the first creation story of Genesis, chapter one), may help us accept gender as a spectrum of experience as well as complementary features in an individual human being.

Male and female “become one flesh” in Genesis 2:24, a view of marriage apparently shared by Jesus when questioned about divorce in Matthew 19:3-12. Thus, male and female blend into a single unit in marriage. This suggests that, **just as binary distinctions between male and female are transcended in spiritual community, so they are transcended by the spiritual union of marriage.** Thus marriage is not dependent on gender.

Jesus implies that the distinctions of male, female, and marriage do not exist in heaven. When asked about marriage in the resurrection, Jesus says in Luke 20:35-36, “Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage...because they are like angels and are children of God.” **Thus, in spiritual union with God, distinctions of male and female are also overcome.**

“Be Fruitful and Multiply”

Sometimes opposition to transgender people comes from God’s mandate, also in Genesis, “to be fruitful and multiply” — procreation. Sex reassignment surgery (not always a part of transitioning) may disable procreation in the sense of bearing children, but not in other ways of creating family. At the same time, the Bible contains **positive references to eunuchs**, who were castrated and unable to procreate, and thus considered unacceptable spiritually.

Through the prophet Isaiah, **God defends eunuchs** and welcomes all such outcasts to the temple: “**For thus says the Lord,** ‘To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; **I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off**’” (Isaiah 56:4-5). Jesus quotes this same chapter of Isaiah when he clears the temple, saying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7; Mark 11:17).

Jesus also defends eunuchs in his teaching on marriage, clarifying it doesn’t apply to everyone: “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). And in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the account of the early church, **Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch** who is reading *Isaiah*.

All these references portend a welcome to those who could not procreate and whose bodies were surgically altered in a way that would exclude them from the temple at Jerusalem. Another surgical procedure, circumcision, was even *required* for males to enter the temple.

“The Lord Looks on the Heart”

It is in this context — a broader understanding of gender *and* of an inclusive and welcoming spiritual community — that two other verses of the Bible about gender expectations need to be interpreted. Deuteronomy 22:5 says, “A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent [against custom] to the Lord your God.” And Deuteronomy 23:1 says, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”

These ritual laws appear alongside other applications of a Holiness Code that are no longer followed by even the most religious. The spiritual goals of the Holiness Code were *separation* (“holy” means “set apart”) as well as *wholeness*, manifest in *personal integrity* and *social harmony*. The latter goal of wholeness may be achieved by transgender persons seeking *gender integrity* and by a community that supports and protects their rights and dignity to achieve *social harmony*.

Consider when God charged the prophet Samuel to find a new king. All the sons of Jesse were brought forward, and all appeared to Samuel more like a king than the small ruddy youngster named David. But God declares to Samuel, **“The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart”** (1 Samuel 16:7). **The sex of a person may be culturally determined by externals, but gender is a matter of the heart.**

What allowed the early church to become more inclusive was witnessing the Spirit at work in the lives not only of circumcised Jews but also of uncircumcised Gentiles. In Acts 10 and 11, Peter, “the rock on which [Christ] would build [his] church,” explains to the first church council that he could not refuse the welcome of baptism to those that God had given “the same gift that God gave us when we believed” (Acts 11:14). For Christian congregations, this may serve as a model for the inclusion of transgender people.

In the view of many Jews and Christians alike, **what mattered to God was not the externals such as circumcision, but rather, “real circumcision is a matter of the heart”** (Romans 2:29, but a concept also in Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4, 9:29; Acts 7:51). This too may guide congregations as they welcome transgender members and work for their equality before the law.

GENDER IDENTITY AND JEWISH TRADITION for use with Step Two, Option B

by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

(Adapted from his essay, “How I Met the *Tumtum*.”)

The first time I met the *tumtum* I was 20 years old and studying in an orthodox yeshiva. In a class on the Mishna, the earliest layer of Jewish oral tradition, I found a startling text buried in a sheaf of handouts. The topic was the rules governing someone who takes an ascetic vow. The rabbis said this vow will be valid if and only if, a son is born to him. However, if the baby turns out to be a daughter, a *tumtum* or an *androgynos*, he is not bound by this vow (Mishna Nazir 2:7).

As soon as I read this perplexing text I called over my teacher and excitedly asked her: “Who is this *tumtum*?” “Oh,” she answered, “The *tumtum* is a mythical beast that is neither male nor female — kind of like a unicorn — that our Sages invented in order to explore the limits of the law.”

The rabbis of the Mishna, who lived in the first two centuries of the Common Era, identify at least four possible genders/sexes: the *zakhar* (male) and the *nekevah* (female), as well as two sexes that are neither male nor female: the *tumtum* and the *androgynos*. They also had two other categories for gender identity that don’t appear at birth, but develop later in life. The “*saris*” is born male but later develops female traits; the “*ayloni*” is born female, but later develops male traits.

All these genders appear frequently in classical Jewish texts. The *tumtum* appears 17 times in the Mishna; 23 times in the Tosefta; 119 times in the Babylonian Talmud; 22 times in the Jerusalem Talmud and hundreds of times in midrash, commentaries and halacha. The *androgynos* appears 21 times in the Mishna; 19 times in the Tosefta 109 times in the Babylonina Talmud and countless times in midrash and halacha.

And yet gender diversity is seldom discussed as an integral part of Jewish sacred texts or as a spiritual resource of our tradition.

Ambiguity as a Holy Place

Differently gendered individuals play leading roles in our spiritual history and already are integrated into the world of Jewish sacred texts. We only have to look for them.

The midrash, for example, teaches that Adam, the first human being, was an *androgynos* (Bereshit Rabah 8). In the Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 64a) the radical claim is made

that both the first Jews, Abraham and Sarah, were actually *tumtumim* who later transitioned genders to become male and female. According to some of the most influential texts of our tradition, the first human being and the first Jews were gender nonconforming people!

The reason that my first Mishna teacher told me that the *tumtum* was a mythical creature is because most modern readers approach Jewish sacred texts with the presumption of finding a system of binary gender that is virtually identical to today's mainstream understanding that there are two (and only two) *opposite* sexes. According to this view the *tumtum* must be either a mythical creature or a statistical aberration.

Judaism speaks in a different voice. Although Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries, they also acknowledged that not all parts of God's creation can be contained in orderly boxes. Distinctions between Jews and non-Jews; Shabbat and the days of the week; purity and impurity, are crucial to Jewish tradition.

However, it was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud the most. Pages and pages of sacred texts are occupied with the minute details of the moment between fruit and bud, wildness and domestication, innocence and maturity, the twilight hour between day and night. We read in the Babylonian Talmud: "Our sages taught: As to twilight, it is doubtful whether it is part day and part night or whether all of it is day or all of it is night.... Rabbi Yosi said: Twilight is like the twinkling of an eye as night enters and the day departs and it is impossible to determine its length." (Shabbat 34b)

We might have thought that the ambiguity of twilight would have made it dangerous or forbidden within Jewish tradition, since twilight marks the end of one day and start of the next. But, in fact, our Sages determined that dawn and dusk, the in-between moments, are the best times for prayer. (Babylonian Talmud Brachot 29b) Jewish tradition acknowledges that some parts of God's creation defy categories and that these liminal people, places and things are often the sites of the most intense holiness. After all, the word for holiness in Hebrew, "*kedusha*," literally means set aside or out of the ordinary.

Created Beings of Our Own

Chapter 4 of Mishna *Bikkurim* offers a long discussion of the ways in which the *androgynos* is "in some ways equivalent to men, in some ways equivalent to women, in some ways equivalent to both men and women and in some ways equivalent to neither men nor women." (Mishna Bikkurim 4:1) Throughout this discussion our Sages take care to define the ways that the *androgynos* deserves protection and the ways in which life is holy for the *androgynos*.

Reuben Zellman, a transgender activist and rabbinical student writes: “Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated. People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders beyond male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.” (From a sermon at Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, San Francisco, CA, Rosh Hashana 2006.)

At the end of Mishna *Bikkurim*, Rabbi Yosi makes the radical statement that the *androgynos* is actually: “*bria bi’fnei atzumah hoo*” (he is a created being of her own). In the Tosefta and in other places this phrase appears in the masculine form: “*B’ria hi ‘fnei atzmo*” (a created being of his own). This Hebrew phrase blends male and female pronouns to poetically express the complexity of the *androgynos* identity. The term “*Bri’a b’ifnei atzumah*” is a classical Jewish legal term for exceptionality. The *koi*, an animal that is neither wild nor domesticated, is referred to by the same phrase (Tosefta Bikkurim 2). This term is an acknowledgement that not all of creation can be understood within binary systems. It is recognition of the possibility that uniqueness can burst through the walls that demarcate our society. It is also a theological statement — it is a proclamation that God creates diversity that is far too complex for human beings to understand. There are parts of each of us that are uncontainable. Every one of us must be appreciated as a “created being of our own.”

THE GIFTS OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE for use with Step Two, Option C

Instructions for small group: Listen to the [recording of the quoted material](#) or take turns reading the quotes below and then respond to the question at the end. Have someone ready to report to the whole group a few of your responses.

GIFT ONE: FREEDOM FROM GENDER EXPECTATIONS [recording]

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

Seeing ourselves as “created beings of our own” provides an opening towards infinitely diverse gender identities that are still authentically connected to our histories and communities. Twenty-first century transgender liberation follows in the footsteps of the ancient rabbis. It also builds upon the past few decades of feminist and LGBT organizing which have created more space in society to express what it means to be male or female and to push at the limits of gender-based hierarchies.

Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

As the mother of a son whom I dearly love, I resent boys being told “real men don’t cry” and “real men are always in control of every situation.”

The binary gender construct does not merely *differentiate* men from women; it elevates men above women. But because we transgender people combine male and female traits in a multitude of ways, we offer visual, embodied assistance in laying aside such unjust perceptions and practices.

Christians have a great transgender role model in Jesus of Nazareth, who was a very androgynous human being. He transgressed so many of the gender/sexual rules of his place, time and culture, including the failure to marry, the doing of “women’s work” such as cooking and washing feet, the willingness to associate himself with the female personification of God’s Wisdom and the willingness to apply birthing, breast-feeding and other female metaphors to his descriptions of his work on this planet.

Rev. Drew Phoenix

It is my hope that the church will begin acting like Jesus.

Gender identity diversity is not easy for most people, as we have been steeped in an either/or, male/female-only understanding of gender. It is hard to believe that our

bodies do not tell the whole story about who we are. I assure you that I am not one-of-a-kind, that there are thousands and thousands of people in your communities and congregations who are suffering with the disconnect that I have felt.

Rev. Phyllis V. Pennese

[A female to male transgender person in my congregation] described his new reality as an African American man, which now included being stopped by police more frequently while driving and being harassed and questioned on the basis of his color and his male gender.

Pastoring people who are transgender presents opportunities to examine stereotypical gender roles and how they are often duplicated in ways that are unhealthy and destructive in relationships [even] in the trans community. Sometimes, I am required to provide pastoral counseling for the partner of the person going through transition.

Jakob Hero

As [my aging grandmother] fought against her present identity, based on the biological reality of the current state of her body, I finally realized *why* I understood how she was feeling. She is in transition and my experience as a person who has transitioned among sexual orientations and gender identities gives me empathy for her situation. Nickie told me that she is not the woman her body tells her she should be. Her true identity is that of the strong, powerful woman she once was.

The reality of the end of life is that our bodies no longer live up to the fundamental realities of who we know ourselves to be. Just as I felt that my body had been hijacked by breasts and menstruation, Nickie's has been hijacked by a list of ailments too lengthy to describe here.

Question for Dialogue

How do transgender people affect your attitudes about gender expectations?

GIFT TWO: A BROADER VIEW OF GOD
[recording]

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

The transgender presence [in our congregations] is a constant reminder of human diversity and hence the much-needed diversity in religious language about God, the Divine Mystery that is beyond human imaginings and limitations.

Drew Phoenix

The fabric between what has been and what can be dissolves. There is Oneness. Let me share a quote from J.D. Salinger's *Teddy*:

I was six when I saw that everything was God and my hair stood up and all that, Teddy said. It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a very tiny child then and she was drinking her milk and all of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean.

Jakob Hero

Once we've made it through the door, transpeople can have a profound impact on faith communities [often encouraging] a non- or multi-gendered understanding of God. As Justin Tanis explains, "Transgender people... have a unique opportunity to witness to the gender of God. We who embody more than one gender within our lifetimes have learned something about our ability to hold both of these spaces within one body. If we, as human beings, can do it, surely God can do it."

Patrick Califia elaborated on the benefits of trans-inclusion for faith communities, "The biggest benefit comes from enacting the principle that God/dess is Love. The great spirit of Creation did not make any of us by mistake. When we can embrace the fullness of that creation and see divinity in each of our fellows, we come closer to melding with divine love and being sustained by that power. On a more mundane level, transgender people are a tribe in spiritual exile. Yet we are also courageous, loyal and ingenious people. We have a lot to offer a congregation where we are wholeheartedly accepted."

Rayees Shah

The three dimensions of my life have expanded exponentially over the last 10 years. I have found my faith again — through mysticism. The acceptance of my transgender identity by my Sufi order's leader was a revelation in and of itself. Ironically, a lifelong struggle with multiple identities has brought me to a path of Sufism defined by the ideal of an identity-less existence. This is the mystic's world of oneness with Allah whereby one loses all sense of one's self as separate or distinct from the ultimate reality and systematically works to annihilate all manifestations of identity, be they religious, cultural, racial or social. There are no hierarchies of power, no regard for the matriarchal or patriarchal politics of religion. The only requirement is to strive to love, to know that love is the only ultimate truth.

Question for Dialogue

How might the transgender experience inform your understanding of God/the Divine?

GIFT THREE: OPENNESS TO AMBIGUITY [recording]

Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

Left unchecked, the conviction that the world is divided into Good and Evil empires, with our nation and our religion everything that is Good, yet confronted by Evil all around — left unchecked, that addiction to dualistic certainty will destroy our entire planet.

As transpeople we know what it is like to be in the middle, both male and female perhaps, neither male nor female perhaps, often rendered invisible or judged as evil by the dominant paradigms of our place and time. So our experience of both-and, of being the often-forgotten middle of the gender continuum, makes us ideal for teaching our fellow congregants [about ambiguity].

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

Although Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries, they also acknowledged that not all parts of God’s creation can be contained in orderly boxes. It was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud the most.

[For example,] we might have thought that the ambiguity of twilight would have made it dangerous or forbidden within Jewish tradition, since twilight marks the end of one day and start of the next. But, in fact, our Sages determined that dawn and dusk, the in-between moments, are the best times for prayer. Jewish tradition acknowledges that some parts of God’s creation defy categories and that these liminal people, places and things are often the sites of the most intense holiness.

Rev. Drew Phoenix

It is important in all of this to acknowledge our human discomfort with ambiguity. Our discomfort causes us to be fearful and to make rules and laws in order to create order, which we then define as the “natural order,” forgetting that we humans have made up the rules.

Jesus modeled something different. In all the accounts of Jesus’ life, we witness his determination to turn religious and societal rules on their head for the sake of wholeness and love. Again and again, Jesus spoke with and touched those whom others rejected because they did not fit into the established rules, traditions and laws.

Jakob Hero

I have experienced in my own body a variety of gendered realities from a number of different vantage points. I have been called many things, daughter, son, sister or brother. The kids who tormented me in high school called me “dyke.” After college I lived as an illegal alien in Croatia, doing LGBT human rights work. The people who shouted at me in the streets called me peder, a Croatian insult for homosexual men. And while not all of these labels still fit me, I would not trade my experience of having worn them — even though they may have felt terribly wrong at the time. Just because I value these experiences does not mean that it has come without cost. There is a little boy in Florida whom I have not been allowed to see for nearly five years now who called me mom.

It has been gender expectations — or more precisely gender ambiguities — that have always defined my grandmother and, by extension, the man who has adored her for the last 65 years. Nickie is a tough woman who up until relatively recently had amazing physical strength, rode her own motorcycle and generally disrupted the stereotype of a typical woman. Nickie and [my grandfather] Hero do not see themselves as transgressive. However, the ways that they have always subverted expected gender norms have made them feel that their lives were fundamentally incompatible with most of the church-going folks that they knew.

Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson

Mine is the gift of being, in a gender sense, ambidextrous. But to experience this means that I must forego the joys of living fully on either side of the street. I need men and women in my life to teach me what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman. But what I’m becoming really good at is being me, Erin, who is “genderedextrous” in her transgender reality. I can celebrate God’s gift in this and look to that day in the fullness of time when I will know perfect wholeness in the rest of God’s bosom.

Question for Dialogue

What advantages come with ambiguity around gender?

GIFT FOUR: EMPATHY FOR OTHERS
[recording]

Jakob Hero

We also have an exceptional ability to comprehend aspects of the lives of men and women who are not trans. Rev. Patrick Califia, an FTM and ordained minister in the Fellowship of the Spiral Path, says, “I feel that being able to stand between genders... gives

me a unique perspective on the lives of men and women and increases my ability to empathize with or serve the spiritual needs of others. It makes me a better priest.

Beyond our understanding of issues specific to gender, transpeople offer diverse viewpoints as people who exist and thrive through struggle. When I interviewed Califia on June 23, 2004, he said, “The suffering that I’ve felt being different is enormously helpful when I work with people who need to individuate or who are called to live in a way that the mainstream doesn’t support.”

Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay

What followed [as my father transitioned to Jessica] was ministry of the sort that changes lives. Jessica began to receive letters from other transgender people who were flailing about in life, seeking the assurance of grace and a hand to help them across into self-acceptance. He was pastoring a flock of people who knew the jarring presence of a gender identity that would not be stilled. No matter what the cost. The stories had to be told. And Jessica — she listened and coached and bore witness through the letters that came to and from her heart.

Jakob Hero

Early in my transition, when I was feeling very alone and sorry for myself, a friend pointed out that there is no such thing as transgender pain, there is just pain. While I did not know many people who had been through the specific frustrations of transitioning from female-to-male, everyone can comprehend discomfort, loneliness and fear. In other words, I did not have to rely only on transpeople for support. Conversely, the pain we endure as transpeople leaves us better equipped to help others.

We have the potential to offer so much if we can just feel safe enough to do so. In addressing these issues it is my hope that transpeople will eventually be able to rely on their faith communities to teach them that they are beautiful and unique embodiments of the Creator. I was incredibly lucky to have found Justin Tanis’s book right at the beginning of the medical aspect of my transition. It was my faith community and this book that changed my worldview while I was transitioning.

Question for Dialogue

How do you empathize with the transgender community?

A LITANY FOR JUSTICE for use with Step Three

I chafe and worse when I consider that by serving my faith movement, I serve a system that is hurtful to too many. I participate in an oppressive system. There is no dodging that truth. So what I tell myself is that I can perhaps do more good working from the inside. I can organize and preach and teach and tell my story and I have seen that it matters. Hearts soften, communities become willing to look at their own fears and the gospel gets made flesh as we become able to see the spark of the Holy in each frightened and beautiful one of us. (Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay)

May we transform our faith communities from the inside out!

We, as transpeople, must open ourselves up in a way that will let this happen. This means letting go of anger towards non-trans people and remembering that, as Virginia Ramey Mollenkott states, “Our struggle for transgender acceptance and respect is not and never has been against human beings themselves. We’re struggling against mistaken ideologies, false scientific/religious assumptions, bigotry and prejudice and the more divisive elements of human thought and behavior” (Jakob Hero)

May we work together to overcome bigotry and prejudice and mistaken religious assumptions.

The consecration of transgender clergy is key... Of course it is also helpful to have public policies that specifically state trans people are welcome in your body of worship or ritual... It takes a lot of training to sensitize people to their prejudices against transpeople and supplant that with a more realistic view of the diversity of human experience. (Patrick Califia, quoted in Jakob Hero)

May our spiritual communities welcome and recognize the spiritual leadership and gifts of transgender people!

Transpeople are particularly well suited to teach congregations about the multiple and profound connections between sex, gender, love and justice. We know how “outsider” status feels and many of us are mature enough to want to spare others from the hurt we have endured. We have had to study gender and sex and how to achieve justice in a way that sex and gender-normative people have never been forced to do. (Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott)

May we learn about sex, gender, love and justice from those who have been excluded or marginalized!

Our faith traditions have a role to play in the expansion of society that will create a world in which everyone's multi-faceted and complicated gender identity can develop without the threat of violence or humiliation. Religion grounds and contextualizes human experience; congregational life offers individuals concrete sustenance and support. (Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla)

May we protect transgender people from individual and institutional violence! May we support them with our care and with our advocacy!

Just over three years ago [a] transgender minister [in my congregation] went through the process of having his eggs harvested, inseminated and implanted into his wife/partner. Our faith community was thus blessed with twin girls. I am acutely aware of my responsibility, not only to be a part of the twins' lives and learning, but also to help create a world that will accept and honor the different way in which their beautiful selves came into being and the unique way in which they model a new paradigm of being family. (Rev. Phyllis V. Pennese)

May we help create a world that will accept and honor transgender people and their families!

Transgender people are often homeless, both literally and metaphorically. Transphobic employment discrimination leads to rampant poverty and homelessness. Discrimination in the health care system means that many transpeople can't afford the surgeries or medications needed to feel truly at home in their bodies. Transgender people also often feel spiritually homeless because our realities have been effaced from sacred traditions and human histories. (Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla)

May we advocate for the rights of transgender people as we welcome them home to their faiths and to their communities!



COMMUNICATING WITH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES & RELIGIOUS LEADERS for use with Step Three

- Arrange an appointment to meet (or talk by phone).
- Arrive early (or phone 30 seconds early).
- Prepare adequately (familiarity with issue, individual's or institution's position on it, rehearsal of "talking points," practice on a friend).
- Prepare a one-page summary of what you intend to say, with your name, address, contact information and faith affiliation.
- Clothe yourself appropriately (or if a phone meeting, be in a place where you will not be interrupted or lose the connection).
- Be friendly (even "chatting the person up" about something else first, like "great coffee" or "nice office").
- Address the person(s) and refer to the person(s) by title and name.
- Explain who you are, especially your religion: "I am a constituent, a voter and a person of faith" or more specifically "a Christian" or "a Baptist" or "a Hindu."
- To a religious leader, explain any leadership roles you have had in your religious tradition.
- Clearly state the purpose for your visit or call ("I favor" or "I oppose").
- Have a concrete 'ask' for your meeting ("co-sponsor ENDA" or "post signs or stickers indicating that we are a welcoming congregation to the trans community")
- Briefly tell one personal story that led you to your position. Stories make the visit memorable and personable. The story will have greater impact if you are able to bring in your faith perspective.
- Add two to three other points that support your position.
- Invite questions or responses.
- Listen! Then respond thoughtfully, without disregarding or disrespecting another's point of view.
- Ask what the individual intends to do in relation to the issue you are addressing.
- Leave the one page written summary of what you said (or send, if a phone meeting).
- Thank the person(s) for the time and consideration.
- Avoid defensiveness, arrogance and argumentativeness.

MY PERSONAL PLEDGE FOR TRANSGENDER JUSTICE

for use with Step Three

- Discover my denomination's stances on transgender inclusion and justice.
- Meet with my minister, priest, rabbi or imam, either alone or with a group of others who share my views.
- Meet with a congregational board or committee or denominational representatives.
- Preach a sermon (clergy or lay) on the topic.
- Develop a liturgy for my congregation for Transgender Remembrance Day.
- Persuade my congregation to use "A Litany for Justice" in worship.
- Distribute "Gender Identity and the Bible" and "Gender Identity in Jewish Tradition" to members of my congregation.
- Write an essay for the newsletter of my congregation, diocese, presbytery, etc.
- Teach a class or lead a conversation for my congregation on this concern.
- Urge my congregation to officially welcome transgender people.
- Write to friends, church boards and elected officials about the concern.
- Write a "Letter to the Editor" or post a statement on a blog.
- Meet with or write to my local Congressional representative or an aide.
- Speak to other groups, classes or congregations.
- Organize or join transgender events, carrying my church banner.
- Teach HRC's Gender Identity and Our Faith Communities curriculum.

TRANSGENDER FAITH RESOURCE GUIDE

(A note on this list: This listing only includes work that discusses faith and the transgender community in a sustained manner. Intersex people are sometimes included under the wide umbrella of the transgender community. Although many of these websites and books discuss faith and the issues affecting intersex people, we did not find resources that dealt with this topic exclusively. To learn more about intersex resources that are not faith-related, we encourage you to visit the website for the [Intersex Society of North America](#).)

WEBSITES

Interfaith

[National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources: *transACTION: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions*](#)

[TransFaith Online](#)

[Transgender Spirituality in World Faiths](#)

[Transgender Religion Global Network](#)

[Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations: Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns](#)

Jewish

[The Dina List: An Orthodox Transsexual Mailing List](#)

[Institute for Judaism & Sexual Orientation at Hebrew Union College](#)

[Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity](#)

[Jewish Mosaic Resource Library](#)

[Jewish Voices: Transgender](#)

[Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture and Spirituality](#)

[Twice Blessed: The Jewish GLBT Archives Online](#)

Muslim

[The Sisterhood: Transgendered Muslims](#)

Christian

[Born Eunuchs](#)

[DignityUSA – GLBT Catholics: Transgender Concerns](#)

[Gender Tree](#)

[Grace and Lace Newsletter](#)

[Light in the Closet](#)

[Made in God’s Image](#)

[More Light Presbyterians: Transgender Resources](#)

[Other Sheep](#)

[Soulforce: Freedom for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People](#)

[TransEpiscopal](#)

[Transsexual Road Map: Spirituality](#)

[Transsexualism and Eastern Christian Thought](#)

[Whosoever: An Online Magazine for GLBT Christians](#)

[United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns](#)

Non-religious

[Susan’s Place Transgender Resources](#)

This is a compendium of resources for transgender people. Not everything referred to is of equal value, but it is still an invaluable resource.

[My Husband Betty](#)

This website created by Helen Boyd is a community of transgender people and their families.

BOOKS

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- Flunder, Yvette. *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005.
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- Kaldera, Raven. *Hermaphroditities: The Transgender Spirituality Workbook*. Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2001.
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- McClosky, Deirdre. *Crossing: A Memoir*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1999.
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- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.
- Tanis, Justin Edwards. *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003.
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Vanderbergh, Reid. *Transition and Beyond: Observations on Gender Identity*. Lodi, New Jersey: Q Press, 2007.

Ward, Graham, editor. *The Blackwell Guide to Postmodern Theology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004.

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FILM, VIDEO and INTERNET VIEWING

Listed on the next page are documentary and feature films in which transgender people and their families figure prominently. The list is by no means exhaustive, but represents a selection of some of the films currently available.

Documentary Films

“No Dumb Questions,” a film by Melissa Regan. This film can be viewed on [Logo](#) and is available from nodumbquestions.com.

“Southern Comfort,” (2001) a film by Kate Davis tracing the life of Robert Eads, a trans man dying of ovarian cancer, can be viewed on [Logo](#) and is available from [Next Wave Films](#).

“Girl Inside,” a film by Maya Gallus (2007) This film can be viewed on [Logo](#) and is available from [Women Make Movies](#).

Feature Films

For information on commercial feature films, please look at web sites such as the [Internet Movie Database](#). Commercial rental firms such as [Netflix](#) also have listings for films with transgender themes.

PART TWO



Essays.

1. [Do We Really Need that T? Trans-inclusion in Communities of Faith](#) – Jakob Hero
2. [What Is Meant by Gender Identity?](#) – Rev. Sarah Carpenter-Vascik
3. [My Father Jessica](#) – Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay
4. [Coming Out Twice](#) – Margaret Blankers
5. [How I Met the Tumtum: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology for All Genders](#) – Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla
6. [I Chose Life: Reading Torah as Myself](#) – Dana Beyer, M.D.
7. [Reconnecting with Allah](#) – Rayees Shah
8. [Seven Reasons Why Congregations Should Embrace Their Transgender Members](#) – Dr. Virginia R. Mollenkott
9. [Easter Transformation](#) – Rev. Drew Phoenix
10. [Providing Pastoral Care for the Transgender Community](#) – Rev. Phyllis V. Pennese
11. [Transitioning While Ordained](#) – Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson
12. [Who Do I Say That I Am?](#) – Jakob Hero

DO WE REALLY NEED THAT “T”?

Trans-inclusion in Communities of Faith

Jakob Hero

This paper was originally presented at the Annual Conference of the American Academy of Religion, November 2004, San Antonio, TX, USA; Gay Men’s Issues in Religion Group. Jakob Hero identifies as a trans man. He is a student at the Pacific School of Religion and is seeking ordination in the Metropolitan Community Church. Originally this was written to address Queer communities of faith — that is, congregations that may include straight allies but are largely LGBT. The same principles may be applied to all communities of faith.

Today’s LGBT movement is comprised of shifting and evolving communities struggling for equality and rights on many levels. We have made significant progress, but perhaps this has come at the cost of our individuality. What is called the LGBT movement often seems to be the white, middle class, moderate-Democrat gay and lesbian movement. This is not the reality. Transgender and bisexual people have been at the forefront of LGBT advocacy since before Stonewall, even when rendered invisible.

In matters of equality and rights it is easy to leave bisexuals and transpeople behind, the latter especially. In pointing this out it is not my intention to belittle the achievements of the lesbian and gay community, which benefit many, myself included. One of these achievements is the establishment of faith communities in which LGBT people are not only tolerated but also accepted and in many cases make up the majority of the membership.

It is my aim to open the discussion of trans-inclusion in communities of faith. I will provide some definitions of the more common terms used and also a brief overview of some basic elements of trans issues. In drawing from the theories and personal stories of gender variant theologians and religious leaders, as well as my own experience as a transperson and a Christian, I will address the roadblocks to trans-inclusion as well as the benefits, not only for transpeople but also their faith communities.

It is sometimes said that the inclusion of the T in LGBT is excessive and unnecessary. However, the addition of the T, not just to the initials, but also to the community, is vital. Not only is there room for transpeople but we actually make up an essential element of queer theology, which may be understood as theology from the margins, from the outsider’s perspective.

Definitions

Transgender discourse is relatively new in congregations and confusion over terminology can be a real hindrance to explorations into trans issues. When a child is born, it is the sex and not the gender that is determined upon birth. Sex is assigned to the child based on the appearance of the external genitalia.

Gender refers to self-expression and identity; it is also the combination of characteristics that society uses to determine whether a person is male or female. In much of the population gender and sex are comfortably congruent. People who subvert gender normativity can be described as gender variant. Gender variance can include anything from the elementary school boy who chooses dolls over football to a person who alters his or her body’s sexual characteristics surgically and hormonally.

Transgender or trans is an umbrella term for people who, through gender variance, contravene society’s expectations of acceptable gender expression based on their assigned sex at birth. Transsexual refers to

a person who has chosen to physically change his or her body through surgery and/or hormones so that outward appearances match gender identity. FTM stands for female-to-male, meaning someone assigned female at birth who identifies as male; the term transman is also used. MTF means male-to-female or transwoman and is someone assigned male at birth who identifies as female. Cross-dressers typically do not wish to medically alter their bodies but dress as the “opposite” of their birth sex. Drag kings and drag queens cross-dress as performance.

Transitioning, which is sometimes called sex reassignment, includes an extensive psychological evaluation and therapeutic process prior to starting a complicated lifelong regimen of hormone therapy. Transitioning can also include a variety of surgical options. Although surgery is important to many transpeople, it is not what defines us. Before having had any surgery I was already living as a man, using the men’s restroom and even had a job where none of my co-workers knew that I had not been assigned male at birth.

Imposed Requirements

In the United States and in many countries abroad, there is a rigorous process one must go through in order to transition. Many health care providers in the U.S. follow the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care, which are intended to protect both the care provider and the client. However, these Standards of Care put the client into a double bind that can truly be damaging and exacerbate the frustration and difficulty of transitioning. The client must prove that he or she is sane while simultaneously convincing therapists, endocrinologists and surgeons that he or she has a mental illness, classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as Gender Identity Disorder.

Instead of actively choosing to re-shape our bodies in order to be more comfortable or to feel whole, transpeople must prove that we are in a situation beyond our control: that we are sick, helpless and at the mercy of health care professionals with their scalpels and hormone injections. I am not sure how anyone can take that route and not come out with a damaged spirit. To be forced to prove that you have no mental illnesses and are completely able to make informed decisions about your body but also say to the same health care providers that you are sick and “trapped” is taxing to even the strongest person.

In his book *Transgendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, Justin Tanis says, “We should be able to do this because it is right for us, not because we have been able to convince a doctor that we have sufficient self-hatred that this path is the only one for us if we are to avoid suicide, but because it honestly reflects the totality of ourselves. This is a spiritual issue because it is the way in which we physically embody the spiritual truths within us. That we reflect outwardly that which is inwardly true for us is a matter of integrity. The spirit calls us away from self-hatred into an appreciation of the wonderful creation that we are” (Justin Tanis, *Transgendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith* [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 2003], 173).

I know firsthand how frustrating and injurious this process is to both the mind and the spirit. My first attempt to start transitioning was far from successful. After a few sessions with a gender therapist I was judged “not a good candidate.” This therapist was disturbed that I did not perfectly fit the mold of what a transsexual man was supposed to be. Among other things, I did not hate myself enough and I would not state that I wanted to be a gender normative heterosexual man post-transition. She said that I would probably never be successful as a man and refused to write the necessary letters that would allow me to start taking hormones and eventually have any of the surgeries available.

It was Tanis’ book that helped me unlearn what the medical and psychiatric communities had imposed on me. I did not have to loathe myself into this journey and transition out of a sense of self-hatred; I could love myself into the man I would become, without having to teach myself to hate the girl I once was. This is a very valuable lesson that faith communities can offer their trans members.

Gender-Variant Christians

In the book *Transgender Journeys*, co-authors Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan speak candidly of their experiences as gender-variant Christians. Sheridan tells her story of self-doubt and struggle as a young boy in the Southern Baptist Church. Sheridan's inherent belief about her own identity was at odds with the gender normative expectations forced on her by her faith community. She says, "...I was convinced I had to sublimate, disguise and even disown the truth about my gender-variant human essence, my very soul was slowly being eaten away" (Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Vanessa Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys* [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press: 2003], 55).

Whereas Sheridan mostly hid her gender-variant feelings until adulthood, Mollenkott was unable to conform to the gender expectations imposed on her. As a young masculine woman Mollenkott's religious community treated her with hostility. When she was a teenager this hostility directly led to a suicide attempt. As an adult, through her own research, she was able to find within scripture a much more supportive attitude towards gender variance. Had this information been available to her when she was young it would have had a major impact and she says: "That knowledge alone would have been enough of a ray of hope to prevent my suicide attempt..." (51).

Both Sheridan and Mollenkott are writing from the experience of participation in traditional, mainstream churches. Surprisingly, exclusion of transpeople is not limited to these religious communities. Trans-inclusion is a struggle even in the more progressive communities that already accept gays and lesbians, as well as in faith communities whose membership is primarily lesbian and gay.

Trans-Exclusion

The factors that hinder trans-inclusion in lesbian and gay faith communities reflect those that stand in the way within secular gay and lesbian space. As a gay man who is also transsexual I often find myself defending my right to be part of the gay community and even to be "allowed" to call myself gay. Although transmen have not always been well received by gay men who are not trans, our struggle is small compared to the war within the lesbian community over the inclusion of transwomen. (Jakob Hero, "Transphobia as the Genesis of Heterosexist Violence and Oppression" [Unpublished, presented at 2004 International Congress on Gender Diversity, Manchester, UK, 2004], 8).

Partly this is because of the ease with which transmen can physically blend in with non-trans men. But though transmen pass well in day-to-day life, things get more complicated when our clothes come off. The surgical options for the construction of a phallus are not nearly as successful as those transwomen have for the construction of a vagina. Often transmen opt not to endure the painful and expensive process of genital surgery. To put it bluntly, it is very difficult to be accepted by gay men if you don't have a penis.

Of course the key to trans-inclusion is not the subversion of traditional gay male sexual fantasies. I do not expect all gay men to embrace transmale anatomy as sexy or erotic. One would hope that the erotic expectations that often exclude us from the bedrooms of non-trans men would not bar us from their churches. But sadly sometimes it does. While I was in transition I was blessed to be a member of a congregation that mostly accepted me as a transperson. However, I had to deal with negativity from some gay male members. I faced rude and inappropriate questions about my body, on a regular basis, as well as tension over my use of the men's restroom.

Trans-inclusion is not simply about our right to choose which restroom to use. The issues are deeper than this and the potential benefits are not limited to the gender variant. People often seek out Queer faith communities after being made to feel unwelcome in more mainstream communities. They come

looking for healing in a place that views them, not as some kind of other, but as an important and essential part of the community. They come seeking a new relationship to the Divine and to find others on a similar journey. Acceptance and inclusion are integral concepts in Queer theology. When a Queer faith community takes the necessary steps to welcome transpeople into their space, the community has the chance to continue enacting these elemental principles of acceptance and inclusion.

Transpeople Gifts to Faith Communities

Once we've made it through the door, transpeople can have a profound impact on all faith communities. For instance, Queer theology often encourages a non- or multi-gendered understanding of God. As Tanis explains, "Transgender people... have a unique opportunity to witness to the gender of God. We who embody more than one gender within our lifetimes have learned something about our ability to hold both of these spaces within one body. If we as human beings, can do it, surely God can do it" (p 134).

We also have an exceptional ability to comprehend aspects of the lives of men and women who are not trans. Tanis cites an interview with Patrick Califia, an FTM and ordained minister in the Fellowship of the Spiral Path, in which he says, "I feel that being able to stand between genders... gives me a unique perspective on the lives of men and women and increases my ability to empathize with or serve the spiritual needs of others. It makes me a better priest" (159). Our ability to understand a variety of gender expressions and identities has a distinct benefit to queer communities because these communities often have a massive gender divide. Having crossed this divide in our own lives, transpeople can comprehend elements of both sides and help all faith communities to better explore these issues.

Beyond our understanding of issues specific to gender, transpeople offer diverse viewpoints as people who exist and thrive through struggle. When I interviewed Califia on June 23, 2004, he said, "The suffering that I've felt being different is enormously helpful when I work with people who need to individuate or who are called to live in a way that the mainstream doesn't support."

Early in my transition, when I was feeling very alone and sorry for myself, a friend pointed out that there is no such thing as transgender pain, there is just pain. While I did not know many people who had been through the specific frustrations of transitioning from female-to-male, everyone can comprehend discomfort, loneliness and fear. In other words, I did not have to rely only on transpeople for support. Conversely, the pain we endure as transpeople leaves us better equipped to help others on their different but also tumultuous paths. In living through the struggles specific to transgender people we also learn to deal with the larger issues of human existence.

In our interview Califia elaborated on the benefits of trans-inclusion for faith communities, "The biggest benefit comes from enacting the principle that God/dess is Love. The great spirit of Creation did not make any of us by mistake. When we can embrace the fullness of that creation and see divinity in each of our fellows, we come closer to melding with divine love and being sustained by that power. On a more mundane level, transgendered people are a tribe in spiritual exile. Yet we are also courageous, loyal and ingenious people. We have a lot to offer a congregation where we are wholeheartedly accepted."

How Faith Communities and Transpeople Can Embrace

There are many ways that faith communities can embrace their trans brothers and sisters. Califia offered some suggestions: "The consecration of transgendered clergy is key... Of course it is also helpful to have public policies that specifically state trans people are welcome in your body of worship or ritual... It takes a lot of training to sensitize people to their prejudices against transpeople and supplant that with a more realistic view of the diversity of human experience."



The responsibility of making trans-inclusion a reality in faith communities does not lie solely in the hands of non-trans members. We, as transpeople, must open ourselves up in a way that will let this happen. This means letting go of anger towards non-trans gays and lesbians and remembering that, as Mollenkott states, “Our struggle for transgender acceptance and respect is not and never has been against human beings themselves. We’re struggling against mistaken ideologies, false scientific/religious assumptions, bigotry and prejudice and the more divisive elements of human thought and behavior” (Mollenkott, Sheridan, 90).

Therefore, the goal is not to aggressively force our way into queer faith communities, but rather to lovingly show our fellow participants, who are not trans, that we are a valid and important part of the community. We must also assert that we have the right to use whichever restroom is comfortable for us and set boundaries about appropriate questions; these issues are inevitable and instead of becoming angry and indignant, I suggest that transpeople find the best way to openly respond to them.

We have the potential to offer so much if we can just feel safe enough to do so. In addressing these issues it is my hope that transpeople will eventually be able to rely on their faith communities to teach them that they are beautiful and unique embodiments of the Creator. I was incredibly lucky to have found Tanis’s book right at the beginning of the medical aspect of my transition. It was my faith community and this book that changed my worldview while I was transitioning.

The string of letters we use to name our community is getting lengthy and the frustration over this is not merely about the awkwardness of adding a couple of extra letters, it is about the growing pains that accompany a shift in the dynamic of the community. Trans-inclusion gives people, such as myself, a chance at a much happier and empowered existence. It enables us to reach out to people in our communities through gendered discourses and in other vital ways. It is obvious to me that something which empowers individuals and strengthens the community is worth working towards no matter how uncomfortable the initial growing pains may seem.

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WHAT IS MEANT BY GENDER IDENTITY?

Rev. Sarah Carpenter-Vascik

*Rev. Sarah Carpenter-Vascik, a Protestant minister with degrees in religion, philosophy, biblical studies and New Testament theology, transitioned after 33 years of marriage. Working at the University of Vermont since 1979, she is now a part of a 14-person team that instructs faculty and staff about transgender issues. She is also a member of the editorial advisory board for HRC's **Out in Scripture**.*

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Let's start with what is for many people a cause for misunderstanding: the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual orientation is the physical attraction felt by two individuals who may or may not be the same biological sex.

By contrast, gender identity is just that, the gender we believe we are and is one component of our total self-image. Individuals who have a conflict between their assigned gender and the gender their self-image is telling them they are, are most often referred to as transgender.

It should be emphasized that there is no cause and effect at work here. One study suggests that the number of fully transitioned transgender people who prefer the company of their own gender is about 47 % and the number who prefers the company of the opposite gender is about 54 %. The actual percentages are somewhat fluid, with any overlap in the numbers taking into account those who are bisexual.

Expectations of Gender

In our society, there exists a powerful binary gender construct, which says that there can only be males and females. From this, society has assembled a list of gender expectations, all sorted under the heading male and female and these are applied to children at birth. However, in reality, there exists an infinite number of possibilities between the extremes of male and female and individuals who live along this spectrum laugh, cry, work, play and live their lives just as everyone else does.

The key to understanding conflicts in gender identity is to bear in mind that most individuals never think about their gender — they have no reason to; they're content with the gender they were assigned at birth and are comfortable with how it does or does not affect their lives. But some begin to question why they don't feel they are the gender that was assigned to them at birth and the gender that everyone is telling them they are. This may begin as early as five years of age. In short, the gender dysphoric child is thinking, "...wait a minute, *this is not who I am*...why are people saying this to me, *why are they making me do this?*"

As the child begins to develop socially, there is increasing pressure from the list of gender expectations. Boys are expected to excel in sports and train for occupations typically associated with the masculine gender and likewise, girls are pressured to work in occupations traditionally thought to be female, to behave in an established female way and until recently, have been denied access to most strenuous activities or contact sports.



As the child progresses through school, these expectations become stronger and are only enhanced by pressure from friends and classmates. Failure to live up to these expectations often leads to labels such as “sissy” and quite frequently, more vulgar and obscene nicknames, causing the child to become increasingly despondent and depressed as the resulting internal conflict deepens. For young teenagers or adults there were, until recently, very few available sources of information and very few people capable of discussing struggles with gender identity. As a consequence the internal conflict felt by transgender people became only more firmly embedded.

Consequences of Gender Identity Conflict

This conflict over gender most often leads to deep depression and anxiety and all too frequently there is an attempt to suppress these feelings through alcohol and/or substance abuse. When all else fails, many transgender youth believe that suicide presents the only viable option.

This issue of suicide in LGBT children is deplorable. In 1989, the Health and Human Services department issued a report entitled, *The Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide*, which found that LGBT youth accounted for approximately 30 % (500,000) of youth who attempted and in most cases succeeded committing suicide annually.

Initially, the report was suppressed by the first Bush administration, under pressure from right-wing groups both in and out of congress. William Dannemeyer, State Representative from California at the time, called for then President Bush to “dismiss from public service all persons still employed who concocted this homosexual pledge of allegiance and seal the lid on these misjudgments for good.” HHS secretary Louis Sullivan responded that the study “undermined the institution of the family.” The report was however leaked to the press and was eventually made public.

Even if the individual makes it through high school and college, as most LGBT students manage to do, the conflict is still there. Most transgender people get married for the same reasons almost everyone does: they meet someone they truly love and want to spend the the rest of their lives with and in a hopeful way, they trust that immersing themselves in a conventional lifestyle will make this conflict between their genders go away. And for the first five to ten years it often does. The transgender person usually has a job; in many cases has a family and a host of responsibilities within their community and families. But eventually, the feelings diagnostically referred to as gender dysphoria resurface, because they never really go away, they’re only dormant, *waiting for the right moment to return*.

Confronted with the knowledge that they are not rid of the conflict, most try again to suppress the feelings, which only adds to the depression. Eventually the struggle between his or her assigned gender and the gender he or she knows deep inside he or she is becomes overwhelming and he or she realizes that there are no more options. He or she cannot continue to live the way they are and don’t see any other option then to start planning for transition.

Transition from one gender to the other is a lengthy process, taking on average two to three years and is one of the most difficult steps in resolving the conflict between genders. The expense is devastating, not only financially but also to relationships. Often individuals lose relationships with spouses, children, family members, co-workers, relatives and friends. In addition, many struggle to hang on to their jobs. Although there has been some recent improvement in this area transitioning people still often wind up committing financial suicide.

Consequences of Gender Identity Resolution

The process of transitioning can be a profound source of healing for transgender people, after struggling with the conflict between living according to their assigned gender and knowing that their true

gender identity is different. Studies show that in most cases those who have fully transitioned are consistently happier, more productive, more innovative and creative and work harder. These qualities, which we associate with a well-adjusted person, were always there, but were just overpowered by a conflict that is so central to everyday life *for everyone*, the self-image.

If the re-entry into the workplace is properly arranged, the individual returns with little if any disruption in the work environment. According to a survey by the Human Rights Campaign, over a quarter of Fortune 500 corporations have reached this conclusion and have established a corporate-wide nondiscrimination policy covering gender identity and gender expression.

The transgender community is not asking for special rights. We only want to live our lives free from fear of physical violence by those who are deeply intolerant of anyone who does not conform to the narrow definitions of gender or does not appear “the way they’re supposed to.” What we are asking for are the same rights other marginalized groups have. When you look at the disproportionate number of violent crimes and murders committed against the transgender community every year, it becomes easy to understand why we have been described as *disposable people*. In actuality, *we’re just human beings*.

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MY FATHER JESSICA

Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay

Elizabeth Macaulay is an ordained Elder in the United Methodist church, serving as Lead Pastor at Richfield UMC in South Minneapolis. Macaulay offers a poignant personal story about her late father, a minister in the United Church of Christ, who kept his gender identity secret most of his life while caring for his congregation through pastoral work and progressive political efforts.

My story and that of my father Jessica are near impossible to tease apart. Her witness will not be stilled.

My father was born in the late 1920's. He was the first-born male child, much beloved. From an early age he was also much jumbled, because the “not right” in his own sense of being was with him always. While he pursued the boy-child engagements of his culture: Boy Scouts and sports and dash, he was drawn to the silk and soft of the things that bespoke woman. He had a cache of the sorts of adornments a child born into woman flesh would cherish and take for granted. He kept them hidden in the dark of his closet, taken out and worn whenever he could get the chance for self-expression.

And he was caught by his father. “What sort of sick was this?” he was asked. It was a question familiar to him, because it lived with him every day of his life. What sort of sick, indeed.

High school was friends and folly and women and jousting with authority figures. College was much of the same. World War II found him serving in the Pacific playing his tuba among other things and when he came back, he enrolled in seminary. What better place to muck about with God? What better way to atone for the shame that would not loose its grip?

Along the way, he courted and won the hand of a woman, my mother. She who was beautiful and talented and gracious and who seemed to know the rights and the wrongs and the absences of gray that made life so painful. Perhaps she would keep him safe from himself.

They married and moved to California for seminary. And within the first year of their marriage, she too “caught” him. Far away from home, with young children and expectations for a good life and with no help from a world that seemed not to know or speak of this “not right,” promises were made: never again would my father do this thing. Never again.

And the door was shut. Between them. Between them and this “thing”.

But not within my father. Jessica would not be denied, try as he might.

An Unnamed Guest

Pulpits were filled, churches served and family made until there were four children: three girls and a boy. The charm and intelligence that was the innate gift of this man were the catalyst. Paired with my mother, they were the American dream. Work with meaning, a growing prophetic voice and social relationships created a life so full and busy and rich.

And always, in my home, there was the presence of an unnamed guest: shame. The unspoken between my parents, the shame they each carried: my father's, for being this oddity and my mother's for perhaps feeling somehow at fault for it. That shame was in the very air I breathed. And I knew it not. I felt it, but could not name it.

I was 15 when my parents divorced. It was shocking to me and to the community that had written the script for the perfect family they thought we were. I cast about for reasons. Was it my fault? What could cause this seismic upheaval? I begged my mother for answers. She told me to talk to my father.

And I wondered: was he gay? Was that the reason for the silence about the divorce? So I asked him. He was in his cups at the time but what he did tell me was that he was a transvestite. It was a word I didn't much understand, but he pointed me toward the MASH TV show and Corporal Klinger on it and I couldn't make much sense of it because Corporal Klinger seemed to be parading around in woman trappings in order to convince people he was crazy and needed to be sent home and what was my father trying to convince his world they ought to do with him?

And what was I to do with him? With this man (was he a man, what was he and what would I call him?) who seemed to be spinning into chaos?

And he did. My father disintegrated. In his forties, he turned to look back on his life — as is fitting in midlife — and the incongruity between his real being and his public face began to exhaust his ability to act “as if.” He began to act out. He took to drink. He was kindly asked to leave his church. He tried to commit suicide. He remarried. He landed in treatment. He got asked to leave treatment. He stayed. He cracked open.

And resurrection commenced.

Welcoming the Stranger

Because now, now at last he could express the reality of his being and what he found was that people did not recoil in horror. Rather, they held him in their arms and opened the gates of their compassion and he began to see that there was not innate “sick” in him at all. There was, in fact, a woman who had been dying to be born, known and claimed. And her name was Jessica. And she was beautiful and fine and deserved to be heard and treasured.

He was not a transvestite. He came to know himself as transgender. A woman cloaked in a man's flesh. A woman who loved women. A woman who rebuilt her life grounded not in some nameless sense of sick, but upon a belief that she was God-crafted and God-kissed and God-blessed.

My father emerged from treatment a new creation. He was grateful to find the only work he could: he became a tech at the state hospital in town. He wiped bottoms and soothed the laments of residents there who were profoundly physically and mentally challenged. He who had preached the gospel from pulpits large and impressive was now literally kneeling at the feet of patients and experiencing the good news of an integrated life. Being able to buy a cheeseburger at Burger King was a big deal. He was financially broken. And he was whole.

He moved into a job in the chemical dependency unit at that state hospital. There, he worked with families seeking healing and understanding in the task that is recovery. He went to 12-step meetings. He found a community of the real.

What followed was ministry of the sort that changes lives. Jessica began to receive letters from other transgender people who were flailing about in life, seeking the assurance of grace and a hand to help them across into self-acceptance. He was pastoring a flock of people who knew the jarring presence of a gender identity that would not be stilled. No matter what the cost. The stories had to be told. And Jessica — she listened and coached and bore witness through the letters that came to and from her heart.

My Dis-ease

And for her daughter? Well, she did the same.

When I had a name for my sense of the below-the-surface stirring that was my father's daily bread, I felt dis-ease and relief. Finally, there was confirmation that I was not being hypersensitive. There was something with a name and maybe reason for the pain I watched wrack my father. I was sixteen at the time. Too young to be left with a drunken confession and no place to unpack it.

It led me many places, this reality in my life. I learn from it yet as I discern how it wove its way into my own story. The silence and questions, the awakening and awareness. What have been their costs and blessings? How do the anger and confusion, the shame and gratitude find voice in me?

My father had been a United Church of Christ minister. He was a gifted and prophetic and large-hearted minister who believed that Jesus taught grace and acceptance and a deucedly difficult way of life that led to fullness of being. There was great admiration for his gifts of provocation and challenge in the pulpit. He was eloquent and quirky and poetic and courageous. He believed in the power of the gospel and the power of community.

He preached for peace during the Vietnam war. He served a denomination willing to be cutting-edge regarding full inclusion of LGBT persons and he preached the joy of diversity. He was sniffing the wind always to find the beat-up and bedraggled folk who most needed to be held in grace while challenging the comfortable to see the fractures in our world.

He crashed mightily. His ministry ended in the ways that seminaries warn about and churches shudder from. And he became in his own mind and in the minds of a goodly number of his parishioners a pariah, this wounded woman/man. His good God knew he was in no shape to be leading a church as their pastor. But he was no less a human being in need of compassion. He was one of the broken he had devoted his ministry to. And while some did reach out, the denomination he had served for decades did not seem to know how to help and so he left.

And I watched this judging and unwillingness to reach toward her pain and I carried for a long time a deep resentment toward the church. The beauty of lived Christian community I had tasted as a cosseted child became the ugliness of judgment and shame and uncomfortable silences. I railed in my soul against the wounding power of communal condemnation.

I went to college as far away as I could go without paying out of state tuition. I was unable to fix anything, so I ran from it. I married a safe man and went about the adventures of having children and furthering my education and attending the busy of my own life-building as my father did the same.

He built a life grounded on sobriety, honesty and a willingness to share his woman-self with more and more people. Because the cost of denying his identity was too high.

My Own Transition

We didn't speak much about his woman-self until I began attending United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities at age 38. It was a three-hour commute from where I lived. It was a crazy thing to do while I had three children and many irons in the fire and it was crazier still because I had seen firsthand the way a community of faith can turn with teeth. I knew the inevitability of pain. I talked it over with my father. He shared his own concerns. But he understood and blessed me.

United Seminary was a midwife for so much in my life. It brought out my voice and taught me the wisdom of my heart. Through classes and discussions, I became aware of the vast silences that had taken

up so much soul space in my life. One of those silences had to do with my father and his journey. I signed up to take the Human Sexuality class offered in conjunction with United and the University of Minnesota. I was tired of the silence and increasingly aware of how much that silence affected my being. The class was co-taught by Anita Hill and Wilson Yates.

For my final project, I chose to interview my father. It was finally time to hear Jessica's story. I was forty years old. It had taken that long.

We sat in my father's home, the cabin that had been our family's for decades and she shared her story. I was able to see pictures of Jessica. I was able to hear about the shame and the deals and the opportunities she took advantage of to go to the University of Minnesota Human Sexuality mixers held for transgender people. I was able to hear the decision making process around gender reassignment surgery and the reasons she gave for not pursuing that route. I was able to hear how she knew herself to be a lesbian, since she was a same-gender-loving woman. I was able to hear her regrets about the hurts experienced by my mother and her church. I was able to hear her share from her heart the ways that she found amazing kinds of grace by being honest with her life. And oh-so- powerfully, she shared her sense that God had created her in love and with an artistry both challenging and beautiful. I gave voice to her in my final paper with a poem I wrote entitled "Jessica's Song."

My father Jessica died six months after our open heart sharing. She had a massive heart attack. Her heart broke partially, I believe, after being weakened by the decades of shame that had so long wrapped her. She had become the most real person I had ever met. I miss her desperately, because she knew so well how acceptance can gentle a person into their own skin. And she shared that acceptance lavishly with those she loved. I was such a one. At her funeral was a rainbow throng of people bearing witness to how she helped them see their own amazing grace. She did that for me.

Singing Jessica's Song

I am a United Methodist clergywoman. I didn't set out to fall in love with Methodism, but I did. I surely didn't set out to serve in a denomination that is in the trenches around issues of full inclusion. I wrestle often around the ethics of the many who are forced to serve in the closet and the many who have been silenced by a miserly definition of grace. I chafe and worse when I consider that by serving the Methodist movement, I serve a system that is hurtful to too many. I participate in an oppressive system. There is no dodging that truth.

So what I tell myself is that I can do perhaps more good working from the inside. I can organize and preach and teach and tell my story and I have seen that it matters. Hearts soften, communities become willing to look at their own fears and the gospel gets made flesh as we become able to see the spark of the Holy in each frightened and beautiful one of us.

Working in concert with others who struggle with the profanity of exclusion practiced all too often in communities of faith, I have organized conferences in Duluth (Opening our Doors, Opening our Hearts - now in its sixth year) and Voices United in Minneapolis-St Paul (two conferences thus far). Churches I serve have become Reconciling congregations wherein LGBT persons and their allies are amazed to discover acceptance and delight in being a part of the community.

At the first Voices United conference (co-sponsored by HRC) held at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist church in Minneapolis, we offered a play, Mrs. Man of God. The play is narrated by a man who is in a partnered relationship with a pastor within a denomination that will not allow same-gender loving persons to serve as ordained pastors. Before the play, the One Voice chorus of Minneapolis performed.



The chorus is made up of LGBT persons and their allies. There were people in that sanctuary singing with all they had about the beauty of themselves and their God. There were transgender people and gay people and lesbian people and bisexual people and my heart near broke at the beauty of it all because here was the promise made flesh. People too long shunned by the church were willing to share with the world the power of their belief in the beauty of the gospel and they were my people and my father's people and I prayed, please God, make us worthy of their witness.

The silence has cost too much. Jessica could not sing her song while she lived. But I can and I do.

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COMING OUT TWICE

Margaret Blankers

A mother of deep faith tells of accepting a lesbian daughter only to discover that she has another son.

Coming Out

Our daughter Sara came out to my husband and me as a lesbian in 1995 at age 18. At the time, my husband Gary and I were active and committed members of a very conservative evangelical church and we had been “educated” on the sin of homosexuality. We were devastated. We worried that our daughter was condemned by God.

Gary tried to “talk her out of it,” and I suggested it was a phase and told her how “sweet” and “feminine” she was. Clearly, we were in denial and had been for years. We weren’t intolerant of gays and lesbians; we had several gay friends, were sympathetic to them and didn’t always agree with our church on this or other issues. We were “okay” with gay people—just not our own daughter.

We met with our pastor and I think he tried to help. But he made it clear that being a lesbian was “sinful” and Sara would go to hell if she didn’t turn around. She was a drummer on our church’s worship team and evidently the pastor had been biting his tongue about her for a while. One Sunday morning when she showed up for rehearsal with a “buzz” haircut, he called Gary at home and said he was going to tell Sara she was off the worship team because she didn’t reflect the church’s values. Gary asked him not to do that, but his mind was made up.

We raced to church so we could tell her first. We knew that as painful as it was, it would be easier coming from us. After Sara played for worship that last time, she walked out and so did most of the worship team. We received supportive calls from friends all afternoon, but it was short-lived. The next week, the front-page story in the church newsletter was a lecture on “God’s” position on gays.

Opting Out

I felt I was at the edge of the abyss: We could either reject our daughter and continue embracing God or reject God and accept our daughter. We loved her, so we did the latter. We resigned from everything at church and never looked back, except to grieve. But standing with our daughter didn’t mean we fully accepted who she was. I truly thought I would never be happy again; I couldn’t stop crying and I didn’t want anyone to know our “shame.” That seems so strange to say now. How could we have been so ignorant? And how could we put God in a box?

I remember seeing people laughing as they walked down the street or in a department store. I became jealous of their happiness. I thought I would never be happy again. Finally, after some prodding from my husband, I went to a psychologist who diagnosed that I was in a deep depression. She offered counseling, reassurance and Zoloft. I took the meds but thought they wouldn’t help because antidepressants were for people who had emotional issues; my problem was real.

For a while, I did nothing. I was like a “deer in the headlights.” Later, Gary and I began researching gay and lesbian issues. We learned to accept that our child is “normal” —no matter what some may think. We learned homosexuality is morally neutral, just like heterosexuality. Once again, we felt lucky to have a great daughter.

But we didn't know where to find support in the Christian community. We assumed our "church days" were over. My heart had been broken by the skewed beliefs about Christ's love that had been foisted on me — and by what seemed terribly superficial. Where was God in all this? How could a loving, Christ-centered church recoil from us and from our child?

We began visiting different denominations — Catholic, Unitarian, Lutheran, Christian Science, UCC, MCC, Unity, Congregational ... you might say, we worked our way through the Reformation! My psychologist also did research and brought me a packet of information from the Presbyterian Church (USA), which included a statement from the 1978 General Assembly. In part, it said, "The church must turn from its fear and hatred to move toward the homosexual community in love" This was a breath of fresh air! Here was a Christian church that at least affirmed God's love for people of all sexual orientations.

Since then, I've learned that many in the PCUSA were disheartened by the adoption of the statement; but from where we came, it was encouraging. I began deeper research into biblical interpretation of the "sin" of homosexuality and began to find peace. Later, we attended our first "Pride Festival," and very much appreciated a booklet provided by a local Congregational church titled, "What Jesus Says About Homosexuality." Inside, the pages were blank. What a lift to my spirits!

Finding Grace

Some time later, my husband and I moved to the Kansas City area; and, being in a new community, I hungered for fellowship in addition to friendship. But I knew I would never again align myself with a church or a belief system that excluded people for any reason. We began our quest for a church home in earnest and went home disappointed many, many times. But in 2000, we found Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church only a couple of miles from home. There we have found a body of believers that is inclusive and welcoming. Amazing! Right here, in the Heartland.

Must I have the "church's" blessing to accept that God loves my child? No and I got along for several years unattached to any organized religion. But my cup was empty and I needed to discover who God really is: For me, it's as basic as reading in the Scriptures that "God is love." God is the quintessential meaning of love, the perfect model for us to follow of acceptance, inclusion and welcome.

Over the previous 13 years, my personal self-concept had grown to include being the mother of a lesbian. Because of my own journey through the tunnel, I had a new appreciation for people who were "different from me." And I came to love this new understanding and find a great deal of fulfillment in working for equal treatment of people regardless of those differences. As the parent of a lesbian, I gained new insights that might otherwise never have come my way. And I learned to embrace and appreciate the beauty of diversity. I once again liked who I was, liked how my heart had been changed and wanted nothing more than to help others find compassion and acceptance.

Meeting Matthew

But the story doesn't end there. As far back as Sara's grade school days, I can remember the battles we had over the way she dressed. As she grew into a teenager, she usually wore baggy jeans that hid her lovely, young woman's shape. Oversized tee-shirts and shapeless pants. Once she went to a prom wearing a beautiful red dress ... and combat boots — making sure a little of the "real" her peeked through, I now suspect.

Finally, about two years ago, it made sense. My beautiful, petite daughter was really my son! At the age of 29, Sara started transitioning into Matthew. From the time she entered puberty, my child felt she was a boy. Looking back, of course, the signs were there — not just in attire, but also in haircuts, emotions, random comments and the ways Sara expressed herself with others. She had been appalled when she grew breasts, humiliated by her period, hated wearing a bra and ultimately kept shaving her head.

As a child, she disliked playing with dolls and most of her friends were boys. But that's not unusual; we just assumed she was a tomboy. Once, at about age 15, Sara came into my bedroom, tears in her eyes and told me she didn't feel like a girl. I asked what she meant and she tried to get through to me. "I just don't feel feminine; I wish I'd been born a boy." I still didn't get it; I encouraged her, told her how pretty she was, that she was, indeed, a very special girl. Shoulders slumped, she just slipped away. Later that night, I heard her softly crying. When I knocked at the door, she said, "I'm fine — I'm just feeling down." She did not want to be disturbed. Too bad we couldn't have figured it out, together, when she was in her teens. It would have saved us both a lot of pain.

Sara started hinting at her desires, but I tried to ignore them. For years, Sara had been emotional and commonly acted impulsively. As a teen she had "self-medicated" through drinking and using methamphetamines. She had overcome this problem but continued to frequently flout convention. I hoped she was just "acting out" and would back off. From the time she was a young teenager, Sara frequently caused "scenes" — it had become almost expected at family gatherings. Some slight — real or imagined — would set her off and a pleasant evening would turn ugly. That's what happened the night she told us she planned to transgender to male.

At a ballgame, Sara and her older brother got into a fight over one or the other's comment and the night ended in turmoil. Later, she wrote a letter to her dad and me, explaining how she felt and what she planned. We saw it as another example of acting out, her way of making excuses for bad behavior. But she meant it. Probably the hardest thing to accept was that she was serious. We had seen variable behavior so often that we were afraid she would move down a path she would later regret.

Looking back, Matt says he didn't really understand his sexual identity until he was in his mid-20s but thought making physical changes was an impossible goal because of the cost, because of a fear of being rejected by Gary and me and because he didn't know to whom to turn to make it happen. But he was one of the lucky ones. As a late-blooming college student, he fell in with a group of people who were understanding and supportive. And in November 2006, she began the journey to become he.

Discerning a Miracle

The first year was especially challenging. With every hormone treatment, I think Matt sighed a breath of relief. For me, it was more like a stitch in my side. When he had chest surgery, he felt a huge anvil was lifted. I felt the weight of the world. How could our child, whom we named Sara Margaret after much deliberation and care, now be Matthew? It was hard to comprehend that I no longer have a daughter.

But a miracle happened about the time surgery was completed. I figured it out: this is what Matt wants. This is what he needs for a happy, healthy life. And I'm proud of him — for his commitment to becoming who he really is and for his bravery for taking such a difficult path.

The journey, for me, has not been nearly as arduous as I expected. For a while, I waited for my feelings to catch up and I even wondered if I were emotionally dry. No, the truth is, I am relieved, too. I have seen Matt as happy as he has ever been. The truth is, he had been a very unhappy girl. And I have found peace with Matt's decision. And after all, it was always his to make.

Recently, we made a pact: I'm not going to go around saying, "When my son, Matthew was a little girl, he" Nor will I say, "My daughter, Matthew, is doing" Instead, we reached a point of demarcation. Before age 29, she was just a really boyish girl! From age 30 on, he is a really cool guy!

Matt's transition has propelled my own journey. I have learned that it doesn't matter what sex we are, how we identify ourselves or whom we love. The important thing is that we do, in fact, love and accept ourselves and others.

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HOW I MET THE TUMTUM

Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology for All Genders

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla is a staff rabbi at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco. His writing appears in numerous magazines and anthologies. He has lectured and led workshops on gender and sexual diversity in Judaism throughout Canada and the U.S. Elliot was ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles in 2006 and trained in chaplaincy at the University of California Medical Center (UCSF) in 2007. This piece shows the fluidity of gender identity in Jewish sacred texts.

A Created Being of My Own

Rabbi Yose says: “An androgynos he is a created being of her own.” The Sages could not decide if the androgynos is a man or a woman. But this is not true of a tumtum, who is sometimes a man and sometimes a woman. - Mishna Bikkurim 4:5

The first time I met the tumtum I was 20 years old and studying in an orthodox yeshiva. I was new to religious Judaism and I was falling in love with traditional texts fast and hard. I was captivated by the mysterious square Hebrew letters and the beautifully convoluted logic of the ancient rabbis. In a class on the Mishna, the earliest layer of Jewish oral tradition, I found a startling text buried in a sheaf of hand-outs. The topic was the rules governing someone who takes an ascetic vow. The rabbis said this vow will be valid if and only if, a son is born to him. However, if the baby turns out to be a daughter, a tumtum or an androgynos, he is not bound by this vow (Mishna Nazir 2:7).

As soon as I read this perplexing text I called over my teacher and excitedly asked her: “Who is this tumtum?” “Oh,” she answered, “The tumtum is a mythical beast that is neither male nor female — kind of like a unicorn — that our Sages invented in order to explore the limits of the law.” Even though I knew next to nothing about Jewish texts and traditions, I had a feeling that my learned teacher might be wrong. I instantly identified with the tumtum. I had spent a lifetime feeling homeless and adrift between the modern categories of “male” and “female.” When I met the tumtum, I finally came home.

The rabbis of the Mishna, who lived in the first two centuries of the Common Era, identify at least four possible genders/sexes: the zakhar (male) and the nekevah (female), as well as two sexes that are neither male nor female: the tumtum and the androgynos. They also had two other categories for gender identity that don’t appear at birth, but develop later in life. The “saris” is born male but later develops female traits; the ayloni” is born female, but later develops male traits.

All these genders appear frequently in classical Jewish texts. The tumtum appears 17 times in the Mishna; 23 times in the Tosefta; 119 times in the Babylonian Talmud; 22 times in the Jerusalem Talmud and hundreds of times in midrash, commentaries and halacha. The androgynos appears 21 times in the Mishna; 19 times in the Tosefta 109 times in the Babylonina Talmud and countless times in midrash and halacha. And yet gender diversity is seldom discussed as an integral part of Jewish sacred texts or as a spiritual resource of our tradition.

It has now been over a decade since I first met the tumtum. In a sense I have come a long way. Squat Hebrew letters are no longer mysterious to me; they are now my intimate friends, my constant companions. In spring 2006 I came out as transgender and was ordained as a rabbi at the same time. However,

in other ways, not much has changed since that first encounter. I still recognize the tumtum whenever we meet in the text and I am still surrounded by voices that deny that the tumtum and I really exist.

Cultural and Historical Sexing and Gendering

The invisibility of the tumtum is connected to the fact that modern society holds that there are two (and only two) ways of being human. From before we are born people ask “is it a boy or a girl?” From the moment of birth onward, most facets of our life — the clothes we are told to wear, the activities we are supposed to like, the careers and hobbies we are encouraged to pursue, the loving relationships we are expected to have — are guided by the answer to this crucial question. The past few decades of feminist organizing have deeply questioned whether we can (or should) see gender as an essential way to divide up humanity. And yet most of us 21st century people were still raised to believe that whether we are a girl or a boy is a simple and unchangeable, fact.

The term “gender” has been used to denote social roles and behaviors while sex indicates physiological differences. Both sex and gender can be complex for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. In recent years theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have pointed to the shifting nature of sex, as well as gender, across lines of history and geography. Butler and other contemporary feminists have suggested that the borders around sex have been drawn and redrawn in various times and places to meet a variety of social and cultural needs.

This view posits that the sexing of our bodies, as much as the gendering of our roles, is culturally and historically construed. This contemporary feminist position is where I situate myself. I do not mean to deny that there are sexual characteristics that unite and divide bodies in every epoch, but I believe that it is impossible to say anything about sex difference that does not also encode messages about gender relations and power. For more information see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

There are countless people who are excluded in varying degrees and ways by this rigid understanding of gender. There is the eight year-old boy who was suspended from school for wearing his ballet tutu to class in upstate New York, the flight attendant in Atlanta who is currently suing her employer for firing her because of her refusal to wear make-up, the butch lesbian who was shouted at and harassed in a women’s restroom in a synagogue in Los Angeles and the more than 40 transgender people worldwide who were murdered in the past year alone in gender-based hate crimes. For an annual listing of such hate crimes, visit <http://www.gender.org/remember/index.html>.

The Transgender Community

The term “transgender” or “trans” is a broad category that encompasses many different types of gender diversity. Anyone who can’t or doesn’t want to “match” the appearance, roles or behaviors of the gender that they were assigned at birth might identify as trans. Some transgender people choose to use surgeries and/or hormone therapies so that their bodies better express their inner gender identities; others may want to take these steps but can’t afford them; and still others have chosen not to modify their bodies at all.

Some transgender people identify wholly with one preferred gender category (male or female) that is not the category they were originally assigned at birth. For example, a person may have been considered male at birth, but clearly understands herself to be female and want to live completely as a woman. However, there are also some transpeople who identify as neither male nor female, as both male and female or who inhabit an alternate, non-binary, gender identity.

All transgender people pay a high social price for living as the unique person that God made us. Transphobia, the fear of gender variance in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not

gender-conform are often met with physical, verbal and sexual cruelty and are sometimes forced to drop out of school, while youth are frequently disowned by their families and lose economic support systems.

Transgender adults face significant obstacles to accessing employment, healthcare, police protection and other essential services. Today, trans and gender nonconforming communities live in relative poverty, habitually alienated from social services, economic opportunity, spiritual care or support. And, as in the case with anyone experiencing multiple oppressions, transpeople who are also people of color, poor or working-class, disabled or otherwise marginalized in our society are exponentially affected. (For more on this, visit the Sylvia Rivera Law Project at <http://www.srlp.org>.)

Gender rigidity affects all of us, even if we are not transgender. Ronnie Paris Jr., a three year old boy, was beaten to death by his father in 2005 for not acting “masculine” enough. Ronnie’s story illustrates the fact that the belief that there are only two ways to be human leads to multiple types of violence and oppression. It limits and circumscribes everyone’s potential.

“Who would you be,” asks transgender activist Pat Califia, “if you had never been punished for gender inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What would happen if we all helped each other to manifest our most beautiful, sexy, intelligent, creative and adventurous inner selves, instead of cooperating to suppress them?” (Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* [San Francisco: Cleis Pres, 2003], p 1.)

Ambiguity as a Holy Place

Faith traditions have a role to play in the expansion of society that will create a world in which everyone’s multi-faceted and complicated gender identity can develop without the threat of violence or humiliation. Religion grounds and contextualizes human experience; congregational life offers individuals concrete sustenance and support.

When I was in rabbinical school, I organized with a group called Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE). One of the communities I had the opportunity to get to know was a congregation in East LA composed almost entirely of Episcopalian Latina Transgender women who use the power of their faith to come together and offer one another support in fighting for access to health care, housing and basic legal protections, as well as lobbying for other political advances that will improve the life of low-income people of color of all genders.

In general, Jews are much less comfortable framing our struggles for liberation in the language of faith or spirituality. However, I believe that Judaism offers us the resources to ground the growing gender liberation movement in a rich theology. Differently gendered individuals already are integrated into the world of Jewish sacred texts if we only look for them and play leading roles in our spiritual history.

The midrash, for example, teaches that Adam, the first human being, was an androgynos (Bereshit Rabah 8). In the Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 64a) the radical claim is made that both the first Jews, Abraham and Sarah, were actually tumtumim who later transitioned genders to become male and female. According to some of the most influential texts of our tradition, the first human being and the first Jews were gender nonconforming people!

The reason that my first Mishna teacher told me that the tumtum was a mythical creature is because most modern readers approach Jewish sacred texts with the presumption of finding a system of binary gender that is virtually identical to today’s mainstream understanding that there are two (and only two) opposite sexes. According to this view the tumtum must be either a mythical creature or a statistical aberration.

However, as writers on the history of sex difference like Thomas Laqueur (*Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992]), Alice Domurat Dreger (*Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998]) and Anne Fausto-Sterling (*Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* [New York: Basic Books, 1990]) have pointed out, a binary approach to sexing the body is relatively new.

They argue that the separation of people into two sexes was part of a larger cultural desire in the 18th and 19th centuries to regulate and control society. The idea of opposite sexes was just one expression of an increased emphasis on binary social and economic hierarchies at a time when modern emancipation movements were questioning these distinctions. Victorian science found “evidence” for the inherent difference between men and women; working and owning classes; white people and people of color in order to justify subjugation and maintain neatly defined categories for human experience.

Judaism speaks in a different voice. Although Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries, they also acknowledged that not all parts of God’s creation can be contained in orderly boxes. Distinctions between Jews and non-Jews; Shabbat and the days of the week; purity and impurity, are crucial to Jewish tradition. However, it was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud the most. Pages and pages of sacred texts are occupied with the minute details of the moment between fruit and bud, wildness and domestication, innocence and maturity, the twilight hour between day and night. We read in the Babylonian Talmud: “Our sages taught: As to twilight, it is doubtful whether it is part day and part night or whether all of it is day or all of it is night.... Rabbi Yosi said: Twilight is like the twinkling of an eye as night enters and the day departs and it is impossible to determine its length.” (Shabbat 34b)

We might have thought that the ambiguity of twilight would have made it dangerous or forbidden within Jewish tradition, since twilight marks the end of one day and start of the next. But, in fact, our Sages determined that dawn and dusk, the in-between moments, are the best times for prayer. (Babylonian Talmud Brachot 29b) Jewish tradition acknowledges that some parts of God’s creation defy categories and that these liminal people, places and things are often the sites of the most intense holiness. After all, the word for holiness in Hebrew, “kedusha”, literally means set aside or out of the ordinary.

Created Beings of Our Own

Chapter 4 of Mishna Bikkurim offers a long discussion of the ways in which the androgynos is “in some ways equivalent to men, in some ways equivalent to women, in some ways equivalent to both men and women and in some ways equivalent to neither men nor women.” (Mishna Bikkurim 4:1) Throughout this discussion our Sages take care to define the ways that the androgynos deserves protection and the ways in which life is holy for the androgynos.

Reuben Zellman, a transgender activist and rabbinical student writes: “Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated. People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders beyond male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.” (From a sermon at Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, San Francisco, CA, Rosh Hashana 2006.)

At the end of Mishna Bikkurim, Rabbi Yosi makes the radical statement that the androgynos is actually: “bria bi’fnei atzmah hoo” (he is a created being of her own). In the Tosefta and in other places this phrase appears in the masculine form: “B’ria hi ‘finei atzmo” (a created being of his own). This Hebrew phrase blends male and female pronouns to poetically express the complexity of the androgynos identity. The term “Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah” is a classical Jewish legal term for exceptionality. The koi, an animal that is neither wild nor domesticated, is referred to by the same phrase (Tosefta Bikkurim 2). This term is an acknowledgement that not all of creation can be understood within binary systems. It is recognition of the possibility that uniqueness can burst through the walls that demarcate our society. It is also a

theological statement — it is a proclamation that God creates diversity that is far too complex for human beings to understand. There are parts of each of us that are uncontainable. Every one of us must be appreciated as a “created being of our own.”

This Must Be the Place

“Home is where I want to be, but I guess I’m already there.”
 -Talking Heads, “This Must Be the Place”

Transgender people are often homeless, both literally and metaphorically. Transphobic employment discrimination leads to rampant poverty and homelessness. Discrimination in the health care system means that many transpeople can’t afford the surgeries or medications needed to feel truly at home in their bodies. Transgender people also often feel spiritually homeless because our realities have been effaced from sacred traditions and human histories.

In order to create a just society for people of all genders we need to create new and infinitely diverse “homes” in the fullest sense of the word. Home as an ideal represents the place in the world where we are the safest. Home is a synecdoche for belonging. It is spiritually, as well as practically, significant to me that one of the first world-changing acts of resistance that came out of the LGBT liberation movement was transgender activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson building a safe home for transgender youth in the 1970s.

Like the feminist and gay rights movements, trans liberation creates changes in society that open more options in the social universe for men, women, transgender, intersex people and everybody else. On Kol Nidre I delivered a sermon at my synagogue on the power of diversity. Afterwards, in the swirling crowd, I felt someone tug at my jacket. I turned around to find a nine-year old boy in lavender shiny ‘Powerpuffs’ sneakers. “I really liked your sermon,” he whispered before disappearing into the crowd. Later, his mom told me that he had been hassled about his shoes at school all week, but after hearing my sermon he had decided to keep wearing them. I don’t really think it was my words that had an impact on him, but the visual power of a gender non-conforming rabbi on the bimah. It took years of struggle by feminist, gay and trans activists in previous generations to allow that moment to happen.

When our struggles for liberation build upon the past we lay a solid foundation for a more expansive future. Classical Jewish sacred texts, composed in the first centuries of the Common Era, provide anyone who can’t or won’t conform to modern binary gender a solid connection to another time, space and community — a spiritual home. I believe that gender multiplicity in the texts of Jewish antiquity when read through a contemporary feminist lens do not just offer the reader more options for finding a home with a gender. Seeing ourselves as “created beings of our own” provides an opening towards infinitely diverse gender identities that are still authentically connected to our histories and communities. Twenty-first century transgender liberation follows in the footsteps of the ancient rabbis. It also builds upon the past few decades of feminist and LGBT organizing which have created more space in society to express what it means to be male or female and to push at the limits of gender-based hierarchies.

The injunction to see one another as “created beings of our own” is the basis of a liberation theology for men, women, transgender people and everyone else: God wants and needs difference and holiness comes from diversity as well as commonality. This theology can liberate all of us from the boundaries that circumscribe our lives. It asks us to throw away the expectations that our bodies or our souls are containable within two categories. It allows us to see each and every other person as a uniquely created being. And it commands us to move through the world embodying and celebrating infinitely diverse manifestations of God’s own image.

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I CHOSE LIFE

Reading Torah as Myself

Dana Beyer, M.D.

Dana Beyer, a Montgomery County politician, fierce advocate for LGBT and women's rights and retired surgeon, is a member of the Conservative Tifereth Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C. This piece tells her story of transitioning and reclaiming the Torah as a text of liberation.

Judaism is a religion that can be both welcoming and fear-inducing, simultaneously. As a child in a yeshiva or Jewish day school, where I spent ten hours or more daily learning my math, chemistry and scripture, I felt both at home and fearful that I would be struck dead at any minute.

There is a morning prayer still recited by orthodox men and since I was in an orthodox school, I was obligated to say it as well. It goes, “Blessed art thou, o Lord, our God, king of the universe, who has not made me a woman.” I can best describe my state at that moment of recitation as swallowing crushed glass. And I could not share this with any rabbi or other teacher, because I would literally have been crushed by the system. Being the smart little boy I’m told I was, I just kept my mouth shut.

Judaism is a critical religion, a faith that demands queries along with obedience that exalts learning while encouraging conformity. Over the past 160 years those demands, those contradictions led to schisms and the development of other denominations, Reform, then Conservative then Reconstructionist.

The Challenge of Transsexualism

Remarkably, it was orthodoxy that first confronted the challenge of transsexualism. When I was in high school, after the news broke of genital reconstruction surgery at Johns Hopkins orthodox biomedical experts pondered the new phenomenon and came to a split decision. A well-respected Israeli rabbi was very supportive, though he stopped short of offering encouragement. But it was that split decision that kept the eternal flame of hope burning within me for some sort of redemption, even if in the world to come.

In the early 90’s both Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism fully embraced trans persons, but since I was conservative/traditional, I was still in some sort of spiritual limbo. When I first began my transition at that time I felt abandoned by my people; not because they would not have been accepting had I reached out to them, but because I was paralyzed by fear from reaching out. And it was the lack of outreach that distanced me from my community, until I finally began making my way back in 1997.

I also had a new wife and a bar mitzvah coming up, so I finally stepped back into the familiar surroundings at the Conservative Tifereth Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C. (For those who don’t know, “Conservative” in Judaism would best be described as “progressive traditional” — women sit with men and participate fully, Jewish law is taken as a guide rather than a legal code.)

When I finally had decided to transition to live as a woman, I sought out not my rabbi, but the rabbi of the LGBT synagogue in D.C., Rabbi Bob Saks. Bob was a friend of Cathy Tuerk, a former member of my synagogue, Tifereth Israel. Cathy was a founding president of Metro D.C. PFLAG and was willing to help mediate my transition with my parents. So with the help of Bob, with whom I laid out a plan for coming out at Tifereth Israel and Cathy, who spoke with my mother, I was on my way.

“As Long as You Keep Reading Torah...”

I worked my shul through the grassroots after presenting my legal case to Rabbi Seidel. I guess I won my case, because he had no qualms, even though he had never before had this experience. Speaking personally to a number of fellow congregants whom I considered as potential allies and opinion-shapers — something like block captains for the various factions in the community — I allowed them to spread the word in their vernacular and left town for my facial surgery, to return to synagogue two months later living full-time as myself.

The Shabbat morning I returned I did what I often did — I read the Torah in the morning service. By that time I had been living as a woman for six weeks and my confidence had grown exponentially. I entered the sanctuary with confidence, wearing an ivory silk sweater and black skirt, quietly took my place in the crowd and when the time came ascended the bima to read the Torah.

Once I got going, I was back in the groove as one of the best in the business, having been doing this service for 42 years. Most people knew who I was and the congratulations came for my work and my presentation when I returned to the crowd. The most memorable comment was, “As long as you keep reading Torah, I couldn’t care less what sex you are!”

To be fair, some people kept their distance. Some shook my hand, a few hugged me. As the weeks went by, those who had been keeping their distance came ever closer and within six months I was just part of the family again. Friends gave me advice on how to present myself, others asked me for makeup tips. I eventually found my own voice, both literally and figuratively, which was the purpose of the entire transition process from the beginning.

Rite of Passage: A Bat Mitzvah

Part of my rite of passage was having a bat mitzvah (I had already been bar mitzvahed back in 1965), having a naming ceremony and attending the ritual bath or the mikvah, in a nearby synagogue. Some trans women had already created life-cycle rituals for these events which I gratefully borrowed and was reborn as Yardana. The quietude of the pool, the uniquely Jewish women’s space, was the greatest blessing of all, allowing me to access the sacred in a manner I had never before even contemplated.

Since then, I have been in a constant process of “coming home,” both physically and spiritually, redefining past experiences in an integral, holistic manner, reclaiming past events and memories from which I had been alienated. I don’t expect this process will ever end. An old medical school classmate whom I met at my recent thirtieth reunion remarked that she could see in my eyes that I was one of “those people.” “Who are ‘those people?’” I asked. She replied, “The world is divided into two types of people. Those who have been tested and get it and those that don’t. You get it.”

I can see that and imagine such tests have been taken through the ages, be they tests of faith, fidelity, courage or fearlessness. I’ve been tested, literally over the past 50 years, in so many ways. I survived the first forty-five years. The Torah says, “Choose life, so that you and yours my live” (D’varim 30:19).

And so I chose life.

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RECONNECTING WITH ALLAH

Rayees Shah

Rayees Shah, a pseudonym, is a Pakistani Muslim transman, now married and living in the West. He writes of the multiple planes of existence of his extraordinary life.

The third dimension or Dimension Z — that most familiar of planes where I have twirled through much of life — that is what I want to write about. In a linear world comfortable with the notion of existing on an XY plane, my tangential existence on the Z plane has been a source of much confusion, dismay and fear — fortunately for me — balanced by wonderful understanding, true love and undying loyalties.

My focus here will be the identities: faith, gender and socio-cultural background that I continually struggle to knit together in a seamless pattern. My faith identity is the constant X variable that has been the fulcrum around which the Y variable of my socio-cultural identity and the Z variable of my gender identity have been pivoting. I chose this XYZ paradigm because it most closely resembles my yearning to understand the mysteries of physics or physical life as parallel to understanding the mysteries of ultimate reality or spiritual life.

I Knew I Was a Boy

My earliest memories are of my mother reminding me to speak like a girl. When I first started to talk I somehow preferred to speak in the male gender, because Urdu, my native language, is gender specific. By the time I was seven I had learnt three important lessons. In no particular order, I learnt that I was different because I knew with an innate certainty that I was a boy, yet could not persuade those around me to recognize this reality and instead suffered punishing consequences when I tried. I tried everything from earnest childish arguments that I could never strengthen with proof to grand tantrums when I rebelled against wearing frilly frocks. Nothing worked! Eventually, I simply evolved into a tomboy — I gave up the arguments and the attempts at reasoning. I remained a girl and acted at every opportunity like a boy.

At the same time, I discovered that my spirit flew into joyous ecstasy whenever I was outdoors and somehow understood that the muddy pools after summer rains, the smell of freshly mowed grass on the golf course and the singing of nightingales heralding the mango season was where God was to be found. Somehow the brimstone and hellfire teachings that were crammed on me from different elders never really scared me into submission. It was beyond belief that the God of Nature, the maker of bird songs and beckoning trees, could be such a hard taskmaster. Yet again I turned to pretense and mindlessly memorized the requisite verses of the Koran with no real understanding of what the ancient interpretations meant.

Finally, I learnt to be my own best friend. Girls disdainfully excluded me from their play, daunted by my hyperactive, riotous nature. Boys avoided me, fearful of my angry strength. I was known for beating up boys twice my size for refusing to let me play soccer with them. I became familiar with the vanities of the female ego and the delicate pride of the male one all too soon.

Interestingly the children of the servants — the cook, the driver, the cleaner, the gardener — did not enjoy this luxury of the ego. I soon discovered a ubiquitous truth: the servants' kids would always be willing to include me in their daily chores and to play whatever games I taught them with gusto. Of course my mother would try to curtail such hobnobbing as best as she could, but the exposure was enough to taint my perspective of my own privileged, elite status forever.

My Social Self-Reliance

This social self-reliance was probably the foundation of my later disregard for convention and my abhorrence of that fundamental fear: what will people think? In other words, my baby steps were taken with these lessons into the Z dimension, quantum leaps away from the XY planes.

This eclectic onslaught of realizations took place against a backdrop of constant travel. I was a military brat who got to travel the length and breadth of the country whenever dad was transferred. Schools changed, friends or the not-so-friendly brats changed — a constant I adjusted to easily given my complete disregard for “relationship building.”

By the time I started fourth grade, I had learnt to speak Urdu with a Punjabi accent, English with an Urdu accent and Punjabi like a native. Yet, wherever I went I was first and foremost a “Mohajjir” an immigrant from India, while all the other kids in the military schools were children of the “sons of the soil” Punjabis, Pathans, Baluchis and some Sindhis from the four provinces of Pakistan and part of the pre-partition landscape of India.

The intersections of my multidimensional existence became ever more complicated. The Z of my gender identity clashed with the XY linear world of male/female, the Z of my immigrant identity collided with the XY world of native/immigrant, my-multi lingual skills and ability to relate to the poor sat incongruously alongside the XY planes of an elite private Catholic convent where English was the only official school language.

I Looked Like a Boy if I Dressed Like One

Over the next eight years, my personality was tamed and groomed by the sisters of the convent. My “wild spirit” was channeled “appropriately” into games and athletics and I became the school’s star athlete, winning inter-school championships year after year. My wrath at the injustice of poverty, the imbalance between rich and poor, found powerful release in debates and dramas and my “Bohemian” dress style.

In sixth grade I cajoled my mother into bringing me a pair of Western boots from one of my parents various foreign trips. So on my birthday, I wore my favorite denim jacket and my new boots to school; the one day a student was allowed to be out of uniform at school. All went well with my friends who were amused at my ecstasy over my new boots and loyally tried to be excited even though their confusion was more than obvious: why is she so excited over a pair of boots instead of nice pointy-heeled patent leather shoes?

Just my luck the headmistress of the middle school decided to take a random tour of the classrooms that particular day! As I was Games Captain, I had the privilege of sitting in the front row, with the result that the moment she swept into the room, she was treated to the abomination of my “get up” in all its glory. Sister Mary was not one given to extravagant displays of emotion, so that one sharply lifted eyebrow provided a swift disclosure of the extent of her disapproval.

Calmly, she informed me I was to remain within the confines of the classroom for the rest of the day, including recess and leave only to go straight home, because she didn’t want a little boy running around in the all girls’ school grounds. This became a defining theme for much of my later life. Blessedly, I looked like a boy if I dressed like one and I exploited this advantage to its full extent as I grew up.

Faith and Family

Faith, though central to my identity, remained the innocent bystander as my personality evolved. By the time I graduated from high school, it had become a token tradition of mindlessly performing rituals

now and then to conform to familial religious traditions. I had begun to resent this God of my childhood, this God of beauty who punished me for unknown sins by condemning me to the pain and misery of female puberty. I had trusted in HIM to make me a man. Instead I was trapped and betrayed by my body.

Relationships for a conflict-ridden creature like me were a complicated affair. However by the age of sixteen, which was anything but sweet, I had managed a long term relationship with my one and only girlfriend. She had come to understand my gender crisis and we had promised to marry the moment I figured out how to get myself fixed!

During my angst-ridden years, my relationship with my sister had also undergone an amazing transformation, from arch nemeses to bosom beaux. So it was to her I first took my quandary. She didn't seem particularly surprised and instead reassured me that I wasn't eternally trapped since she had recently read an article in mom's Woman's Own magazine about a tennis player who had become a woman, Renee Richards!

We both decided the best course of action would be to talk to mom. To my complete surprise, Mom was outraged. I was forbidden from meeting my girlfriend at whose unsuspecting door was laid all the evil in my head. My gender identity was never discussed again. Mom focused all her energies on exhortations of prayer and forgiveness; ensuring I did my share of household chores (until then my sister had happily picked up the slack I was all too willing to offer).

My sister was graceful, elegant, charming; subtly introduced to eligible bachelors at family gatherings; served tea on trollies to my elder brother's friends even as she was chaperoned by my vigilant brothers! Ours was truly a family in no man's land! Liberal, educated, independent women — anomalies in a patriarchal, conservative Islamic society where women by and large were uneducated, living under the veil of ignorance, subjected to patriarchal hegemony as third rate citizens of a third world country. Meanwhile, the women in my family existed in a bubble: we were part of the upper echelons of society, enjoying privileges of freedom of thought and movement that left the conservatives aghast and the thinking, conscience-stricken liberal disgusted at the inherent hypocrisy of it all. This was the formative world of my dimension Z.

However, the next few years were surreal, defined by radical upheavals and wrenching pain. When I was eighteen, my mother passed away after a short three-month battle with leukemia. My father was left clueless and floundering with two single daughters. My brothers were both married by then but my sister and I were still finishing our education and marriage was not at the top of our agenda.

My First Pilgrimage to Mecca

A few months after my mother's death, my sister and I accompanied my father on our first pilgrimage to Mecca to perform "Umrah." The abbreviated version of the annual pilgrimage of Hajj, the Umrah can be performed year around and as many times as one might wish — unlike the Hajj, which is mandatory at least once in a lifetime for every Muslim. By this time my relationship with God, perfunctory and tenuous at the best of times, barely existed. Yet, I hoped this pilgrimage would bring some meaning to my life.

The inner peace I sought so fervently was nowhere to be found. Umrah did nothing to fill the emptiness that constantly haunted my soul and consumed the very fiber of my being with sorrow unlike any I had ever experienced. Suffocating under the veil wasn't conducive to fervent prayer either!

I returned from the pilgrimage and shortly thereafter moved to the city of Lahore to study architecture. I lost myself in the bohemian artistic environment. My soul submerged, I swam blithely the murky waters of unconventional, creative thinking, experimenting with atheist philosophies and quoting poetry

through the night. My chequered educational background springboarded from then on with stints at mechanical engineering, a bachelor's in liberal arts and an MBA in management. I traveled through East Asia, England and Europe, eventually arriving in the United States.

My world changed again. It began when I had the good fortune to befriend a transwoman online who opened up the door of a hitherto unknown transgender community, a community that soon became my adopted family with fellow transmen sharing my own experiences of alienation and solitude. The rich diversity of my transgender family astounded me with trans men and women hailing from every faith, every continent.

My friendship with a Presbyterian minister enabled me to reconcile my gender identity with my faith and rekindle that long extinguished flame of faith by once again having conversations with God. Her counseling helped me make sense of the dichotomies between my faith, my social upbringing and my gender in ways I had never imagined possible. It launched me on a journey filled with pain and sadness, but blessed with self fulfillment.

My dad's acceptance of my gender transition was for me supreme irony. I had not imagined a military man would take my revelations lightly. Yet he embraced me for who I am, thereby ensuring the rest of my family came also to accept me, albeit reluctantly. My father's word was supreme law as far as my extended family was concerned but reconciliation proved too difficult for my brothers. It has been 15 long years since I have spoken to either of them.

Sufism and Activism

The three dimensions of my life have expanded exponentially over the last 10 years. I have found my faith again — through mysticism. The acceptance of my transgender identity by my Sufi order's leader was a revelation in and of itself. Ironically, a lifelong struggle with multiple identities has brought me to a path of Sufism defined by the ideal of an identity-less existence. This is the mystic's world of oneness with Allah whereby one loses all sense of one's self as separate or distinct from the ultimate reality and one systemically works to annihilate all manifestations of identity, whether religious, cultural, racial or social. There are no hierarchies of power, no regard for the matriarchal or patriarchal politics of religion. The only requirement is to strive to love, to know that love is the only ultimate truth.

The exhilaration of freedom after completing my gender transition catapulted me into the world of transgender activism. I became the poster boy for the successfully transitioned female to male. I managed to win the acceptance of my family and my faith community while being blessed with good health despite myriad physical changes associated with transitioning and, through it all, I managed to hold a regular job in the banking industry while co-founding and leading a non-profit organization for gender education!

I danced my way, yet again, across the increasingly intersecting planes of my multiple identities, this time in reverse gear! Attending speaking engagements and conferences nationwide for transgender education and rights while not out at work was an exercise in balancing the reality of society's fear of the unknown, the responsibility of sustaining my own livelihood and striving to realize my deepest faith foundation of translating divine love into ordinary human experience.

True to form God continues to have a sense of humor! Reconnecting with Allah outside the boundaries of Islam's strict ritualism is not the end of it all. As it turns out, this very unconventional meeting of kindred spirits, which gathered to chant in remembrance of Allah, became the forum where I met my future wife. Her acceptance of my proposal of marriage after understanding my life history was another miracle I had prayed for but did not expect. A wedding followed a whirlwind courtship.

All This and Marriage Too!

I had overcome the challenges of many relationships from daughter to son, from sister to brother, from niece to nephew, from aunt to uncle, but nothing had prepared me to be a husband! Marital life is another twisting path I walk; balancing the three planes of my ever evolving identities while intending to seamlessly merge all into a unity.

True to form my wife and I defy many of society's norms and our relationship symbolizes the best and the worst of an "Odd Couple." I struggle as I write this piece to describe our relationship which is so far from the ideal I had aspired to, yet in many ways exceeds any ideal for which I could have hoped. The nomad traveler paired with the settler, the passionate idealist in a three legged race with the quiet stoic. She is the quintessential homebody with deeply ingrained eastern traditional etiquette and even more deeply ingrained conservative Islamic values. She has defined my life with quiet, predictable stability even as we have come to loggerheads with my yanking her around on adventurous travels far beyond her regimented world, introducing her to fearsome social circles of eclectic LGBT gatherings and debating endlessly on the virtues of mysticism versus conventional religion.

I am amazed by the depth of her compassion, the ferocity of her anger and the gentle tenderness of her ministrations to the sick. She is coolly silent in dealing with her own fears and confusion regarding my gender identity, yet is catlike in defending me against any real or perceived threat with claws out to draw blood! Her fear for my safety is evident in her disapproval of my public activism. Yet she feels torn witnessing the sorrow I experience no longer being actively involved in transforming the world, one person at a time. But then both of us also recognize that this struggle of love is also a journey of growth and where it's going to lead to we'll eventually find out. The important realization is that love will conquer all for it is the core light of love that continues to draw us to each other like moths to lamps.

The Pilgrimage of Hajj

I'll conclude this journey through time and space with a brief description of our most transforming journey: the pilgrimage of Hajj. The grueling rituals performed with millions of fellow pilgrims, the collective prayers of gratitude at the Kaaba, the crescendo of cries beseeching forgiveness in the desert plain of Arafat — an unforgettable experience of personal witness to the inexplicable divinity that permeates this world of ours replete with signs for those who understand.

As I stood shoulder to shoulder with my wife in the magnificent courtyard of the prophet Mohammad's mosque in Madina, quietly chanting prayers in the twilight, I thought about the last pilgrimage I had made. I had never imagined almost twenty years ago that I would perform Hajj as a man amongst men much less with my wife by my side, but Glory be to Allah for the daily miracles that unfold so seamlessly in our lives. I looked around me and saw people from every corner of the world all drawn together with the same yearning to realize their faith's mission of seeking closeness to the ultimate reality.

But we don't have to travel around the world to find this closeness — it's in our hearts all the time and we experience it so richly when we open our arms in loving embrace to all those different than ourselves. While recognizing our differences, we may see a familiar light shining through eyes that no longer belong to strangers. So silence the nay-sayers with peace, respect their linear XY world and then fling yourself with a leap of faith into Dimension Z!

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SEVEN REASONS WHY CONGREGATIONS Should Embrace Their Transgender Members

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Ph.D.

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We are living at a time when a 15-year-old boy was shot to death for wearing eye shadow and high heels to school and for expressing his attraction to a boy a year younger than himself. ("Mixed Messages," *The Advocate*, April 8, 2008, 29-33.)

It is also a time when a transman, now legally male and married to a woman, is six months pregnant with a healthy baby girl. ("Labor of Love," *The Advocate*, April 8, 2008, 24.)

And it is a time when ordained transpeople in the ministry are often punished for transitioning by transfers involving huge pay cuts or even by loss of their credentials and livelihoods. It is high time for congregations to study gender issues, to wake up to the importance of noticing and embracing their transgender members and to reach out in ministry with the transgender community as a whole.

In her book *Our Tribe*, the Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson writes about the three Magi who brought their gifts to the baby Jesus. She comments that it is highly doubtful that they were kings, but quite possible that they were "queens" — and probably eunuchs and shamans. My guess is that they were people who today would be termed transwomen. I mention the Magi because they are so important to the religious significance of Bethlehem and because they symbolize to me the many gifts that transpeople of faith have to offer any congregation that will receive us.

There are many reasons why spiritual communities need transpeople, but here I offer seven:

- Any congregation that honors the Bible should also honor transpeople because both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are extraordinarily transgender friendly.
- Transpeople will assist congregations in transcending gender stereotypes that alienate men from women and from their own bodies and that oppress women and girls all over the world.
- The transgender presence is a constant reminder of human diversity and hence the much-needed diversity in religious language about God, the Divine Mystery that is beyond human imaginings and limitations.
- Until our recent cultural blindness, transpeople had always been recognized as specially gifted at building bridges between the seen and the unseen world, time and eternity.
- Transpeople have by the circumstances of their lives been forced to become specialists in the connections between gender, sexuality, spirituality and justice and many congregations are in desperate need of our assistance in making those connections.
- Because they embody "the forgotten middle ground" or ambiguity, transpeople can help to heal religious addictions to certainty — addictions that are threatening the survival of our entire planet.
- Transpeople embody the concept that just as all races are "one blood," all genders and sexualities are one continuum and that the one blood and one continuum are sacred: made in the holy, divine image.

Now we turn to the evidence.

1. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are so transgender-friendly that any congregation that claims to honor and obey biblical principles needs to embrace transgender people.

In both Jewish and Christian scriptures, there is a trend toward inclusiveness of sexual and gender minorities. For instance, Deuteronomy 23:1 bans eunuchs (today's intersexuals or post-operative transwomen) from entering the temple, but Isaiah 56:4-5 welcomes eunuchs; Deuteronomy 22:5 forbids cross-dressing, yet Jewish sages had multiple names for transgender people. (See "How I Met the Tumbum" by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla in this section of the curriculum.)

Jesus praises eunuchs (Matthew 19:12) and the Ethiopian eunuch is promptly baptized (Acts 8:26-29). Romans 13:12 and 14 encourage spiritual cross-dressing and Epimenides, a cross-dressing and homoerotic shaman, is quoted favorably in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12-13.

Genesis depicts Adam as a hermaphroditic (intersexual) Earth Creature, later divided into the human male and female, while Genesis 1:27 states that both male and female are made in the image of the One Creator, who is thus depicted as androgynous (or "transing" human gender). Accordingly, in addition to the imagery of the Holy One as male, both Jewish and Christian scriptures include imagery of God as female: giving birth, Holy Wisdom (Sophia), Bakerwoman God and so forth. (For details, see Virginia R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine* [Crossroad, 1983], available at www.questia.com.) The point, of course, is not that God is literally either male or female, but encompasses *both*, as well as all the in-between areas represented in the created universe.

If Matthew 1:23-25 is read literally, the virgin birth of Jesus was a birth without male input, so to speak (parthogenetic). In that case, he was chromosomally female; and according to the Gospel account, he was outwardly male. (The male appearance, science tells us, can occur through a late-term sex reversal.) So anyone who takes the virgin birth literally must acknowledge that Jesus was intersexual (a form of transgenderism) and thus a perfect incarnation of the entire sex/gender continuum. Thus, an early baptismal formula, Galatians 3:28, testifies that in Christ "there is no longer male and female." For further details on the science of all of this, see Edward L. Kessel's "A Biological Interpretation of the Virgin Birth," published in the conservative evangelical *Journal of the American Scientific Association*, volume 35 (September 1983), 129-136.

Finally, the Christian scriptures contain many transsexual images: women are called brothers; men are called the brides of Christ; Jesus and Paul are depicted as mothers (John 16:21, 17:1 and Galatians 4:19); Jesus is depicted as Holy Sophia (Wisdom); the church is described as a female body with a male head (Ephesians 5:23-33); and the female body of Christ is urged to grow up and become the male head (Ephesians 4:15).

Circling back to Hebrew scripture, the name used for God in Genesis 17, *El Shaddai*, can mean "the many-breasted one." So if circumcision is a form of symbolic castration, then as Michael Carden has pointed out, "To be in a covenant with the androgynous El Shaddai, Abraham and his male descendants are symbolically marked as eunuchs." (Michael Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," *The Queer Bible Commentary* (SCM Press, 2006, 35.) In other words, circumcision marks Jewish men as symbolic transpeople.

The Jewish feminist scholar Judith Plaskow points out that the rabbis have only tolerated "a certain range of gender ambiguity" because they did not want to clash directly with society's gender division. But now Dr. Plaskow is calling Jews to "dismantle [the traditional] binary gender construct," to move "beyond the gender binary" by embracing transpeople of all sorts: transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, bi-gender people who alternate gender expression within various circumstances, intersexuals, gays, lesbians and bisexuals who are transgressively gendered and heterosexual masculine women and feminine men — indeed, anyone who "has rebelled against traditional gender stereotypes and refused to accommodate to them." Plaskow asserts that "heterosexism and homophobia [and, I add,

sexism itself] cannot finally be overcome without moving beyond the gender binary.” (Judith Plaskow, “The Challenge of Transgender to Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Judith Plaskow (The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 13-36.)

Finally in Matthew 5:22, Jesus warns that “anyone who calls his brother *racha* shall be in danger of the council.” *Racha*, a non-Greek word, was a total mystery until 1934, when an Egyptian papyrus was published that used *racha* in reference to a particular person. In that papyrus *racha* is equivalent to the Greek word *malakos*, meaning “morally soft,” “self-indulgent,” “voluptuous” — all those things “real men” were not supposed to be. (See Will Roscoe, *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love* [Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004], 200). As with many 17th Century English writers the King James translators interpreted *malakos* as “effeminate,” by which they meant men who could think of nothing else than wom- anizing [NOT homosexuals]. See L. D. Scanzoni and V. R. Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1978, updated 1994, 78.) In this context Jesus was apparently warning against mockery of men who do not meet the traditional standards of masculinity — people who are “gender- queer” or transgender.

2. Transpeoples’ open presence will assist congregations in transcending the gender stereotypes that alienate men from women and from their own bodies and oppress women and girls all over the world.

As the mother of a son whom I dearly love, I resent boys being told that “real men don’t cry” and “real men are always in control of every situation.” Apparently even the apostle Paul believed that cultural lie. He wrote in Ephesians 5:29 that “no man ever yet hated his own flesh.” But I have heard of men who have justified battering their wives by saying, “The Bible says her bones and her flesh are one with mine and I can break my own bones whenever I want to.”

The staggering global epidemic of HIV AIDS among women and girls combined with the high levels of violence and discrimination against women suggests that the binary gender construct does not merely *differentiate* men from women, it *elevates* men above women. Because transgender people combine male and female traits in a multitude of ways, we offer visual, embodied assistance in laying aside such unjust perceptions and practices.

3. Transpeople are constant reminders of human diversity and hence will serve as constant reminders that our language concerning divinity needs to be diverse as well.

Years ago, the Roman Catholic philosopher Mary Daly critiqued patriarchal theology, claiming “If God is male, then the male is God.” And when I served on the National Council of Churches Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee, the news reporters could not quite believe that people in the 1980s would actually think God is male. So the committee sent reporters out on the streets of New York City to ask about the gender of God and watched the results on the nightly news. Everyone interviewed referred to God as “He” and had a male image to go with that pronoun.

Because transpeople have paid a high price for their awareness that masculinity and femininity are not necessarily tied to a person’s genitalia they are often particularly sensitive to the injustices and oppressions that arise when some people are considered more sacred, more perfect and more entitled than other people.

Transpeople are not tied to what Daniel Maguire calls “pelvic orthodoxy” (*Ed. note: rigid thinking about sex, gender and reproductive issues*) and as such they remind congregations of our human diversity. If allowed they can help us see that all of us in all our diversity are made in the image of one dazzlingly diverse Spirit. If we insist that congregational worship must reflect that dazzling diversity, we will be doing justice to the entire human race and the natural creation as well.

4. Until our heavily androcentric cultural assumptions blinded society to the realities of gender diversity, transpeople had been recognized as being especially gifted at building bridges between the seen and the unseen, time and eternity.

The great Puritan poet John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost* that the angels are gender-fluid shape-shifters, who can “either sex assume or *both*” — and that these transgender angels can make love with one another as *transangels* whenever they so desire. (*Paradise Lost*, I. 423-431).

The Sumerian goddess Inanna transcended gender polarities and sometimes turned men into women or women into men and many of her priests were eunuchs or transwomen. To this day many African tribes have religious leaders who are transpeople. Burmese *acault* (a male who exhibits transgender behavior) are known for their cross-gender behaviors and are regarded as servants of a female Spirit. Many shamanic traditions honor transpeople as well as same-sex lovers for their spiritual facilitation.

I refer interested readers to Leslie Feinberg’s *Transgender Warriors* and my own book *Ominigender* for further information about transgender people as bridges or gate-keepers to deeper, more fully spirited states of being. Perhaps this gift has been nurtured in us by our struggles to unify the various aspects of our inner natures. If today’s congregations are eager to develop a more mature spirituality, it seems to me they will seek out the considerable spiritual gifts of the transpeople in their midst.

5. By the circumstances of our lives we transpeople have been forced to do a lot of introspection about sex, gender, justice and spirituality.

We live in a society that is really quite divided and distraught concerning the connection of gender and sexuality to justice and spirituality. Christian churches especially have fallen into such fear of embodiment and sexual pleasure that they are spending inordinate amounts of time on issues like same-sex marriage, contraception and abortion — meanwhile sometimes ignoring the facts that 1.3 billion people are starving, global warming is catastrophic, huge military budgets are killing the world’s economies and healthcare needs are unmet for millions of people.

Indeed many congregations are still supporting the expenditure of millions of dollars on sex education that urges teenagers to pledge celibacy until marriage, ignoring the mounting evidence that teens who have taken virginity pledges are four times more likely to have oral sex and six times more likely to have anal sex than those who refused to take the pledge. (Debra W. Haffner, *What Every 21st Century Parent Needs to Know* [NY: Newmarket Press, 2008], 101.)

It has always interested me that when the author of Ephesians wanted to depict marital love, he employed imagery of Christ and the church, urging every Christian-male and female--to defer to every other Christian out of reverence for Christ, the anointed Child of God (Ephesians 5:21). The public or communal nature of this imagery suggests that our passionate love for another individual should be the means of opening our hearts to loving people in general. If our love is genuine love, there is no way that it can rightfully exclude others from its embrace.

I do not take this to mean that we must behave sexually with everyone we love, but rather that *if* what we call love causes us to hunker down and care about nobody beyond our immediate partner and family, we need to take a more critical look at what we are designating as *love*.

Thoughtful readers may by now be wondering why transpeople are particularly well suited to teach congregations about the multiple and profound connections between sex, gender, love and justice. First, because we know how “outsider” status feels and many of us are mature enough to want to spare others from the hurt we have endured. Second, because we have had to study gender and sex and how to achieve justice in a way that sex and gender-normative people have never been forced to do.

We have a great transgender role model in Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Gospels represent as a very androgynous human being. Even if Jesus was not intersexual chromosomally, a possibility mentioned earlier, he was still androgynous because he transgressed so many of the gender/sexual rules of his place, time and culture, including the failure to marry, the doing of “women’s work” (such as cooking and washing feet), the willingness to associate himself with the female personification of God’s Wisdom and his use of female metaphors such as birthing and breast-feeding to describe justice work.

If we take seriously the New Testament description of Jesus’ relationships with Mary Magdalene and with the Beloved Disciple (John? Lazarus?) (John 13:25, et al.), we might conclude that Jesus was bisexually oriented — and if so, it seems hugely ironic that in our society, bisexuals are still forced into invisibility and powerlessness, often out of loyalty to a Jesus who was perhaps one of them. It is also ironic that people who cannot or will conform to our society’s inaccurate and unjust binary gender norms should be persecuted in the name of Jesus, who was possibly intersexual but certainly a gender transgressor in many other ways. It is also paradoxical that right-wing Christians should oppose same-sex marriage in the name of Jesus and “family values,” when in fact Jesus exalted the love of friends, not marital love, as the greatest love there is (John 15:11-13) and had many negative things to say about putting the love of family above the love of God and like-minded companions.

Amy-Jill Levine, an orthodox Jew and New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt University, says that Jesus’ anti-family comments would have made him quite unpopular among the Jews of his place and time. (Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* [HarperSanFrancisco, 2006], 55-56.) Yet today many congregations turn a deaf ear to Jesus’ critique of “family values.” It falls therefore to transpeople and our allies to lift up Jesus’ understanding of love as mutual concern, deference and compassion, the kind of fair-minded egalitarian love that good friends feel for one another.

I was recently shocked to learn that some right-wing evangelicals are now teaching that the Christian Trinity is *not* co-equal, but that Jesus is in fact subordinate to the Father and the Holy Spirit is subordinate to both the Father and the Son. (See, “In Gender Debate, Jesus is Subordinate” *The Christian Century*, Feb. 20, 2007). Why is this flirtation with the Arian heresy surfacing now, for the first time in public since the fourth century C.E.? (Ed. note: *The Arian heresy asserted that Jesus was not fully divine and not one with the Father.*) I would argue that it suggests a robust use of subordination to preserve male supremacy in the home and church.

This development runs counter to the wisdom of Jesus who exalted the love of friends over marital love, because for centuries marriage has been structured around the concept of male primacy and female subordination. Will Roscoe was right on target when he wrote, “In place of stratified social relations, Jesus holds up the ideal of community love. This way of loving suspends existing hierarchies and transforms unequal relationship into egalitarian ones.” (Will Roscoe, *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition*, 75.) Congregations need the transgender presence to witness the intimate connections between gender, sexuality, spirituality and human justice that was addressed by Jesus’ ministry.

6. Because we transpeople embody “the forgotten middle ground” or “ambiguity” itself, we can help to heal religious addictions to certainty.

Left unchecked, our cultural addiction to dualistic thinking-- manifest often in the idea that the world is divided into Good and Evil empires, in which our nation and our religion reflect everything that is Good, confronted by Evil all around--may destroy our entire planet. At this time, conditions in the world are so dangerous, so charged with “us-versus-them” religious bitterness and ethnic warfare, that we might be forgiven for assuming that things are hopeless. But as historians like Karen Armstrong have shown us, the great religions and philosophic traditions that have nourished human hope for centuries all had their inception from the ninth to second centuries B.C.E, all periods of hideous violence.

Space does not permit me to describe the many horrors that Karen Armstrong sets forth in her book *The Great Transformation: Beginnings of Our Religious Traditions* (Knopf, 2006). I urge you to read that book

to kindle in yourself hope that indeed, “the darkest hour is just before dawn.” Armstrong shows that from the 9th to 2nd century B.C.E., Confucianism and Taoism developed in China; Hinduism and Buddhism developed in India; monotheism developed in Israel; and philosophical rationalism developed in Greece. And out of the monotheism of Israel flowered three other major traditions: Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

What do all of these traditions have in common? All of them emphasize, in one way or another, the abandonment of egocentricity in favor of a spirituality centered in loving kindness and compassion. All of the sages from these sacred traditions responded to the violence of their place and time by calling for self-criticism and the shouldering of personal responsibility. And each insisted that insight must be followed by practical and effective action.

Human beings have never surpassed these teachings. Yet in our own time we seem to be turning religion into something opposing those teachings. Instead of viewing religion as something that humanizes our behavior at a profound level, many of our contemporaries are willing to fight battles over doctrines or metaphysics, over belief systems, over knowledge that will eventually vanish away.

Armstrong points out that to the sages of all the great religions, religion *is* compassion: “First you must commit yourself to the ethical life, then disciplined and habitual benevolence, not metaphysical conviction, would give you intimations of the transcendence you sought” (p.xiv). Never before was it an orthodox belief system that constituted religion; it was “respect for the sacred rights of all beings.” What all the sages have always known is that “sympathy cannot be confined to our own group...we must all learn to ‘yield’ to one another” (p.398). Remember, “Each tradition developed in societies like our own that were torn apart by violence and warfare as never before; indeed, the first catalyst for religious changes was usually a principled rejection of the aggression that the sages had witnessed all around them” (p.xiv). Our contemporary catalysts for shifts in our religious thinking are events like the Holocaust in Europe, Genocide in Bosnia and more recently in Darfur, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US, the Iraq war and the like.

As transpeople we know what it is like to be in the middle, both male and female perhaps, neither male nor female perhaps, often rendered invisible or judged as evil by the dominant paradigms of our place and time. We also know that we are well meaning but not always good; we know that we are a mixture of good and evil just as everyone else is. So our experience of both-and, of being the often-forgotten middle of the gender continuum, makes us ideal for teaching our fellow congregants the deceptively simple, deceptively difficult message central to all true religion: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Of course the love taught by the sages does not refer exclusively to sexual love, but neither does it exclude sexual love. Eros — our sexual drive — is a spiritual urge, driving us toward connectedness. It can be misused and *is* misused, any time we use sex to gain control or dominance over others. But our eros can also “inspirit” and inspire us to reach out in compassion toward others.

I was moved to read in Chris Beam’s book *Transparent* (Harcourt, 2007) about a group of teenage transpeople in Los Angeles who mentor and assist one another in learning the skills necessary for survival in a transgender-phobic society. Who taught these trans-teenagers to be so helpful and faithful to one another? Chris Beam found that “whether they’re still being parented at home or not, many transgender teenagers will find new parents. These parents are called drag mothers or drag fathers and often they are just a few years older than their ‘children.’”

Beam continues, “They’ll mentor anywhere from a handful to dozens of the younger street kids, sometimes renting out large apartments as shelter for the more transitory kids. This especially happens in Harlem...” (p 55). Instead of allowing their own suffering to make them bitter, these drag mothers and fathers somehow find it possible to transform their pain into supportiveness for those growing up after them. I think many congregations might need to learn about love and “keeping faith” from transpeople of this compassionate type!

7. Finally, transfolk are valuable to congregations because with all our diversities, we incarnate the truth that just as all races are “one blood,” all genders and sexualities are “one continuum” — and also that the one blood and one continuum are sacred, holy, divine.

When speaking to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul not only quoted the transgender Epimenides to the effect that “in [God] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 11:28); he also said that God had “made of one blood all nations [of humankind] to dwell on all the face of the earth (Acts 17:26). What mincemeat Paul’s statement makes of the old racist rule that if a person’s bloodstream contained even one drop of “black” blood, the person’s race must be black, as opposed to the normative and privileged white race with 100% Caucasian blood!

Thanks to DNA studies, we now know that many so-called black people have 30% or more of Caucasian (Euro) blood, while many so-called white people have 30% or more of African blood. And we now know that all of the atoms in our bodies are replaced every seven years, moving into other bodies or into the atmosphere. So the atoms that make up the bodies of all persons are ultimately identical and constantly interchanging as our tissues age and die and rebuild. Indeed, God “made of one blood all nations to dwell on all the face of the earth.” And if religious people had believed and acted upon their own sacred texts, they would never have indulged in slavery or other forms of racism and nobody would be attacking anybody else for being located differently on a sex/gender continuum that is in constant flux anyway.

If we could line up the entire human race from darkest skin to lightest skin, where would “black” end? Where would “white” begin? And if we could line up the entire human race from most male to most female, where would “masculinity” end and “femininity” begin and what would those concepts mean in the first place? If indeed every one of us lives in God and has our being within the Divine Womb, what difference does it make if we have relatively minor, benign diversities?

All diversities point toward one Great Spirit who chooses to incarnate in millions of different forms. As the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah put it, “Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord” — which means that there is no space left in the universe for anything or anyone that is not sacred. Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Corinthians 12:6). And the Psalmist exclaimed, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7), concluding that the Holy One is indeed everywhere.

A twelfth century Sufi mystic summarized these biblical insights this way: “Every person represents one of the unknown names of God.” Personally, I do not want to run the risk of mistreating or excluding any person in whom some aspect of God’s mystery is revealed to me.

A Concluding Questionnaire

I conclude this essay with some questions for those readers who may or may not consider themselves gender-different, but who are pastors, priests, rabbis, imams or otherwise leaders within their various congregations. Does it *matter* to you that the Bible honors transpeople? Could your congregation use some help in rising above harmful stereotypes of what “real men” and “real women” are supposed to be? Could your congregation’s pronouns and images concerning God be more supportive of justice by becoming more diverse? Could you use some congregants who are especially gifted at bridging the gap between time and eternity, the seen and the unseen?

Could your congregation be making healthier connections between sexuality, gender, spirituality and justice? Could some of your congregants use some assistance in transcending their addictions to certainty,

their “pelvic orthodoxy” as well as their dualistic categorizations that cast “us” as “good” and “them” as “evil”? Could your congregation profit from additional in-house examples of the fact that we live in a divine milieu, where everyone and everything has its being within God’s being?

If your heart has answered yes to any of these questions, then you have acknowledged that your congregation needs to embrace its transgender members — and needs to invite more transpeople to enter into fellowship with you.

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EASTER TRANSFORMATION

Text: John 20:1-18 | April 16, 2006

Rev. Drew Phoenix

Rev. Drew Phoenix transitioned from female to male while serving St. John's United Methodist Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He preached the following sermon to the congregation which supportively and successfully transitioned with him in their understanding of gender identity.

Resurrection is transformation. We have many symbols of resurrection's transformation: the cocoon transformed into a butterfly, the egg into a chick and ashes into the phoenix. The old shell falls away; a new form emerges. Apparent death is trans-figured into life.

In John's account of the resurrection, Mary of Magdala goes to the tomb and finds, much to her amazement and confusion, that the tomb is empty and alerts the other disciples, who come to verify her story but leave before the mystery unfolds. Jesus is gone! Remaining near the tomb, Mary asks, "Who has stolen his body?" The angels appear and try to console her. Then Mary turns around and sees "the gardener" standing there. "Where have you laid the body? Where is Jesus' body?" she asks. Then the gardener (Jesus) says to her, "Mary!"

Immediately Mary recognizes Jesus.

Jesus' *spirit* is still present, but his form, his body, has changed. Mary thinks he is the gardener. Jesus' body has changed to the point where even his most beloved friends, like Mary, do not recognize him.

What's really amazing about the Resurrection is *not* that Jesus' *body* is resuscitated (After all, God can do what God wants!). What's amazing for me is that God can change our form — the way we manifest Christ's Spirit — now, *in this lifetime*.

The most exciting thing for me is Mary's trans-formation, her resurrection in the here-and-now! What's exciting is *our capacity* right now, today, to spiritually grow and morph into the people God created us to be, to the point that even our loved ones do not recognize us anymore!

Mary *lives into that possibility* of trans-formation, even if at first she is scared, while others run in fear and disbelief. And sometimes we hold each other back from trans-formation. Remember? Jesus tells Mary not to hold onto him. Sometimes we block other people's spirits from shining. We bury each other's light.

There's so much that blocks our transformation and the transformation of others. Like the disciples, we want to go back to the old life where everything was familiar and not frightening like now. New life is frightening! Transformation can be unsettling!

We hide behind our stones. Mary asks, "Where have you laid him?" Perhaps the real question is: "Where have you laid your self?" Where have you buried your spirit? What would it take to roll away your stone?

Mary hears her name called and in that moment, she sees differently. She sees in a new light. Mary stands at the threshold and lets go. Mary stands at the threshold of seeing things differently, responding creatively to the possibilities of change, the possibilities of resurrection, here and now.

Let Jesus show! The Light of the Creator is within you.

We are, after all, spirit beings in earthly bodies.

Remember when Jesus goes up on the mountaintop with some of the disciples? The spirits of Moses and Elijah are present and Jesus is trans-figured into pure light? We have that trans-figuring light within us. And as scripture says, “Christ is our atonement.” Christ is our At-One-Ment. Christ’s spirit makes us whole--body, mind and soul — and at one with God and all of creation. After all, we all come from the same Light. Our separation is only an illusion.

On Good Friday, the veil in the Temple is torn in half . . . dissolves. The fabric between what has been and what can be dissolves. There is Oneness. Let me share a quote from J.D. Salinger’s Teddy:

I was six when I saw that everything was God and my hair stood up and all that, Teddy said. It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a very tiny child then and she was drinking her milk and all of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean.

In our own resurrecting, we experience At-One-Ment. Our spirits are freed and released from captivity. The fabric of what has been and what can be dissolves.

St. Symeon, “the New Theologian”, who lived from 949-1022 A.D., said it like this:

*We awaken in Christ’s body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ. He enters
my foot and is infinitely me.*

*I move my hand and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Christ
(for God is indivisibly whole, seamless).*

*I move my foot and at once
Christ appears like a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous?
Then open your heart to the Spirit
and let yourself receive the One
who is opening up to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love
we wake up inside Christ’s body.*

Easter is our celebration that we are resurrecting, too. We are being trans-formed by the Spirit. We are at-one.

**Story Shared at the 2008 General Conference of
The United Methodist Church
Ft. Worth, Texas
Rev. Drew Phoenix**

I spent the first 46 years of my life homeless. I do not mean “homeless” in the way that you are accustomed to using the word; I have always had the good fortune of having a house to live in. Rather, I am talking about a kind of homelessness born of a disconnect between my internal, spiritual self and my physical, external self. I was born transgender.

From the beginning, as early as age 4 and 5, I attempted to communicate this disconnect to my parents. I insisted that I was a boy, even though the doctor who had delivered me had assigned my sex as female. My assigned sex did not match my true gender identity of male. I felt like a boy, acted like a boy, dressed like a boy and wanted to hang out with the boys.

So it was very difficult when I reached puberty to be pressured by family, friends, church and community to conform, to dress and act, like a female. At that time (unlike now), there was little knowledge about gender identity and certainly no available medical expertise, to help my family and me understand the spectrum and complexity of gender identity. And, now we understand that the God in whose image we are created, is both and at once, female and male, encompassing the entire spectrum of what we call “gender.” “Let us make humankind in *our* image,” God said in Genesis.

Growing up, in the absence of this understanding and knowledge, I felt homeless. It is as if “I,” my spirit, had no place to reside. Friends and family describe me, before I physically transitioned, as not being fully present, as not showing up completely.

It took me 46 years to find role models, educational materials and the medical expertise to help me understand that I could take healthy steps toward integrating my body with my mind and spirit. I could transition from my shell-of-a-self to my authentic, God-given self.

Two years ago, within the context of my relationship with God and with the guidance of my medical team, I took those steps toward wholeness. I transitioned from female to male. I have come home to the child God created me to be and I am joyful, whole and peaceful.

**Press Statement for the 2008 United Methodist Church
General Conference
Rev. Drew Phoenix**

My name is Drew Phoenix. I am here today because something deeply intimate and personal for me has become unnecessarily controversial for our United Methodist denomination. It is my hope that my presence and my story will be an occasion for our church to sit down together and explore the complexity and diversity of gender identity and expression and that out of that process, we will open our hearts and church doors to transgender persons. It is my hope that we, the church, will begin acting like Jesus.

Two years ago, after decades of prayer, spiritual reflection and guidance by medical professionals, I decided to physically transition to my true gender identity. When I was born, the doctors assigned my sex as female; however, I never felt, even as a toddler, that my assigned sex of female matched my true gender identity of male.

I grew up in a Christian family. I was baptized in the Church. I was ordained as a United Methodist pastor and have faithfully served in that capacity within the Baltimore-Washington Conference for 19 years. I currently serve a rapidly growing, vital United Methodist congregation in the heart of Baltimore City. And now, within the context of my growing relationship with God, I am living into the child God created me to be. I am transgender.

Gender identity diversity is not easy for most people, as we have been steeped in an either/or, male/female-only understanding of gender. It is hard to believe that our bodies do not tell the whole story about who we are. I assure you that I am not one-of-a-kind, that there are thousands and thousands of people in your communities and congregations who are suffering with the disconnect that I have felt.

It is important in all of this to acknowledge our human discomfort with ambiguity. Our discomfort causes us to be fearful and to make rules and laws in order to create order, which we then define as the “natural order,” forgetting that we humans have made up the rules.

Jesus modeled something different. In all the accounts of Jesus' life, we witness his determination to turn religious and societal rules on their head for the sake of wholeness and love. Again and again, Jesus spoke with and touched those whom others rejected because they did not fit into the established rules, traditions and laws.

Jesus was unwilling to condemn anyone for being different. Instead, he condemned rigid conformity to rules that marginalize or exclude people. Jesus' central message is that God's love and grace extend unconditionally to all of us, not because we look a certain way or have a particular identity, but because we are all children of God created in God's image. Each of us is a beloved child of God. No exceptions.

At this 2008 General Conference, we have the powerful opportunity to prevent new efforts to forbid persons like me from answering our call to serve and to participate fully in church life. I hope we will make choices that communicate the good news that God's love and grace extend unconditionally to all of us.

The church we love does not discriminate.

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PROVIDING PASTORAL CARE

For the Transgender Community

Rev. Phyllis V. Pennese

Rev. Phyllis V. Pennese, M.Div., is the Founder and Pastor of Pillar of Love Fellowship Church of Chicago, Illinois and a regional and national leader in The Fellowship, a multid denominational network of predominantly African American congregations. She is also a member of the editorial advisory board for HRC's Out In Scripture. In this piece she writes about caring for the transgender members of her church.

I am a pastor who does not know what it's like to be transgender. Unfortunately, lots of people feel that to empathize with other people's location in life gives them the ability to "know exactly" how another person feels. But I'm here to make it perfectly clear that I do not "know exactly" how transgender people feel as I am not myself a transgender person.

What I can tell you — as a pastor who founded a church five years ago that includes African American transgender people as part of its founding membership — there are joys and blessings as well as challenges that are specific to pastoring with the transgender community. And there are additional challenges that come as a result of being African American and transgender in a society that is homophobic, transphobic and racist.

Unique Pastoral Concerns

There are unique ways in which I am called to love and support the transgender population in my congregation. The trials and struggles they face are sometimes different from LGBTQ and heterosexual allies I am called to pastor.

For example, early in the stages of transition for one of my female-to-male transgender members who is also a minister, I was asked to give remarks at his grandfather's funeral. I gained respect in his eyes and heart that day as I queried him, prior to giving those remarks, whether I should refer to him by his male name or by his female name. I wanted to show respect for his family and the stage of his transition with his family.

His previous pastors had forced their own personal agendas, believing that an "in- your-face" approach with his family was the way to force the issue and provide him with the liberty to be his emerging, new, male self. However, this approach had caused damage to his familial relationships and it deprived him of determining how, when and if he would negotiate his transition with his family.

New Family Models

Just over three years ago this same transgender minister and congregant went through the process of having his eggs harvested, inseminated and implanted into his wife/partner. He was, during this process initially rejected and turned down for the procedure by his family physician based on moral objections.

My pastoral care and support to him and his wife as a couple and as a part of our faith family required me to be sensitive both to their unique challenges and burdens and the particular grief and lament they confronted when negotiating medical care, family dynamics, employment and insurance issues.

I also felt the need to provide greater visible support at the hospital during the numerous visits that accompanied this high-risk pregnancy. Eventually, they gave birth and our faith community was blessed with twin girls. I was present in the delivery room as they were born and they are every bit my grandchildren as if there was a biological connection. The pastor that loves and pastors their parents and who did their baby blessing is not simply their pastor, but proudly, I am their “Granny.”

I am acutely aware of my responsibility, not only to be a part of the twins’ lives and learning, but also to help create a world that will accept and honor the different ways their beautiful selves came into being and the unique ways they model a new paradigm of being family.

Complexities of Race and Gender

This same transgender minister recently participated on a panel after a screening of a video about transgender people, but the video was blatantly bereft of transgender African Americans. He described his new reality as an African American man, which now included being stopped by police more frequently while driving and being harassed and questioned on the basis of his color and his male gender.

I recently made a hospital visit to see another minister in my church, an African American male-to-female transgender woman who is a U.S. Navy veteran receiving care in a Veteran’s Administration hospital. As I walked to her room, I realized that part of my pastoral care needed to include checking in with her about how she was treated there as a female, as well as how it felt emotionally to be in an environment which might be less empathetic and accepting of her transition to being female.

Pastoring people who are transgender also presents opportunities to examine stereotypical gender roles and how they are often duplicated in ways that are unhealthy and destructive in transgender relationships as well. Sometimes, I am required to provide pastoral counseling for the partner of the person going through transition. That partner must navigate the emotional and physical differences taking place in the person in transition, as well as the impact it has on them separately and together as a couple.

Toward a Kinder, Gentler World

Pastoring a faith community that includes transgender participants calls on me, as a pastor, to provide opportunities for those in our faith community who are LGBTQ, along with our straight allies, to learn more about our trans brothers and sisters. As a pastor, I seek opportunities to provide visibility for the trans members in our faith community and in the queer community at large. That way, others may recognize the full spectrum of who they are and the gifts they bring to the community. It also helps the community realize our range of who we are as a faith community.

As you can see, being a pastor who loves and supports transgender people in our family of faith includes experiences that are unique to the trans community. It also means acknowledging, affirming and reassuring the trans community of God’s love for them even though the gender that was biologically given to them does not match the gender in their hearts and souls.

Caring for them also includes some universal elements of pastoring which, at its foundation, entails corraling the whole community of faith to honor, respect, celebrate and love the diversity reflected in creation, including the diverse representations of gender identity among God’s children.

I provide pastoral care for people who are transgender out of dedication to my call to serve a radically inclusive vision of God’s people. But I also do it in the hope that by the time my grand-twins are required to negotiate the world for themselves, that it will, in fact, be a gentler, kinder world for them, their biological family and their church family.

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TRANSITIONING WHILE ORDAINED

Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson

The first Protestant minister to transition while in ordained office and retain ordination describes the difficult and lengthy process and challenging biblical, theological and psychological questions she was asked. Rev. Dr. Swenson is a transgender woman, therapist, Executive Director of the Southern Association for Gender Education (SAGE), and a member of HRC's Religion Council.

It was one of those phone calls you put off as long as possible, yet there I was in the basement apartment in our home actually pressing the buttons on the phone. Everything inside me did not want to do it and still my fingers pressed until the ringing sound emanated from the earpiece. A moment later and I was talking with the chair of our presbytery's committee on ministry.

"Hello?"

"Hi. This is Eric Swenson, a minister member of presbytery. I'm calling to inquire how one goes about changing their name on the roll of presbytery."

"Well, it's really not too hard. You just need to send a letter to the committee stating the name you want changed and we take it from there."

"I see."

"By the way, what are you wanting to change your name to?"

"Uhh. Erin Katrina Swenson."

"Why would you want to change your name to that?"

"I am actually changing my gender expression to female and thought that this would be a better name."

After an awkward pause he responded, "I see... I am going to have to get back to you on that..."

And with that my transitioning within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) began. It was 1995, the 23rd year of my work as an ordained Presbyterian minister. My work as a counselor kept me in the background as far as ministers in the presbytery went. The issue of my gender had never come up in all this time.

Twenty minutes later the phone rang and it was the committee chair. It hadn't taken him long to do what he needed. He said that he would need a letter from me with three things. First he wanted me to describe the process of gender transition I was planning. Second, I should formally request the name change. The final one was what hit hard. I was to tell the committee what my intentions were regarding my ordination. I explained to him that I was happy with my life and work and only wanted to change my gender. He said that nevertheless he would need my stated intentions about my ordained ministry.

I hung up but kept my hand on the phone to steady some dizziness. My stomach began to ache and my heart seemed to float into my throat where it was pounding like an African beat. Just how much did I

want to retain my ordination? Questions about health insurance for both Lara and me, provided through the church, raced through my mind. Lara's medical expenses due to severe disabilities and periodic hospitalizations were astronomical and would easily overwhelm our financial security. No new insurance company would cover us because of this. I couldn't bear the thought of any of my gender transition hurting Lara or making her the cause of the family's poverty. Somehow this thought bolstered me and hardened my resolve to see this through. I still hadn't answered the question though. How much did I want to retain my ordination?

I sat and wrote the requested letter, describing my process to date, including the completion of facial electrolysis, five months of hormone therapy and a legal name change. Then I wrote:

Another result of my exploration has been the discovery that, other than my gender, I am actually quite happy with my life. I expect to continue to work as a marriage and family therapist here in Atlanta, to continue to provide divorce and family mediation services and to continue the active expression of my ministry. This means that I would like to continue to be an ordained member of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta and to be an occasional interim or even perhaps stated supply at some time in the future. The year spent as a temporary pastor at a suburban church was a wonderful experience for me and I would love to do that again.

My "case" had been presented for the first time and now I would have to begin the process of waiting for a response. I wasn't idle time by any means. My concern grew for the congregation I had recently served as an interim pastor. Back on the phone, this time to call the pastor who had been called to that church during my interim. He was wonderfully understanding when I explained what was happening in my life and he shared my concern over the welfare of the congregation. We agreed that I write a letter to the church governing board (the Session) explaining what had transpired in my life. The pastor presented this to the Session with a letter of his own. The Session decided to send both letters to all adult members. I held my breath waiting to be inundated with a sea of shock and dismay. Not only did it not come, I received more than a dozen notes from various church members expressing their care and their support. When all was said and done the pastor had heard only one clearly negative comment from any church member. What a relief!

Then came a letter from the presbytery. The committee on ministry had been casting about for help and had discovered a similar case that was in process in another presbytery. In fact it was our neighboring presbytery right here in Georgia. The really strange thing is that, other than this one case, no one in the whole Presbyterian Church could locate any record or recollection of the issue of transsexualism coming up in the denomination. Surprising in light of the fact that sex reassignment had been available for over forty years.

What to Wear? What to Say?

They requested a meeting with me. I had been living full time as a woman for almost three months and had no intention of confusing the matter by trying to appear before the committee as a man. But what to wear? Should I try to soft pedal the woman thing and go for a unisex style, like a pants suit? Or should I make a clear statement and wear a really feminine dress? My characteristic Presbyterian moderation took over and I decided on a conservative navy business skirt suit.

It was a very warm June day when I donned my new suit and went to the presbytery office nestled in one of the large office parks scattered about the north side of Atlanta. The reception area was a small area separated from the business office by a couple of low bookshelves. A few office staff continued to work at their desks oblivious to my presence or the gravity of this meeting. After awhile a committee member came and greeted me saying that the committee was ready to meet with me. I stood, took a deep breath to try to relax muscles already overstressed and followed.

It was a very large room, typical office park style with acoustical ceiling and the horrible fluorescent lights that make every light skinned person look like they had died about twelve hours ago. Folding tables had been arranged in a very large square, with the committee members seated around the outer perimeter. I quickly scanned the room for an empty chair and the only one available was all the way across the table on the far side of the room. I tried to dismiss a thought that this had been done to somehow test my walking skills in the low heels I had decided to wear with my suit. Once I sat, I scanned the room.

There were familiar faces, the faces of friends and strangers. It was a mixed group in about every way except age. Everyone seemed to be over 40 and about half seemed to be over 60. I tried to make myself comfortable, aware that every eye was on each of my moves. I quickly abandoned any thought of comfort and opted for appearance, posing myself in my folding chair in as ladylike a fashion as I could muster.

The committee chair welcomed me and reviewed the committee's work on my request. They had received my letter and contacted various authorities regarding my request hoping for guidance. They had investigated the similar case in our neighboring presbytery and determined that my request was significantly different in many respects. Their request for this face-to-face meeting was their next step and they would be interested in getting my input on further steps they might take. I listened to all of this and felt a wave of warmth through my now locked muscles. I was moved by how much work the committee had already invested in this issue. He then said that the committee members had a number of questions for me, but that they wanted to hear from me first about how I had gotten to this place in my life.

I told them the story of my first experience in Mom's powder room when I stuffed tissue in my tee shirt, awed by the vision of myself in the mirror. About how I struggled through adolescence, hung my hopes on my relationship with Sigrid, my wife and despaired shortly after our wedding. I reviewed the years of lying, denial and avoidance and the great cost in terms of my mental health as well as my family's well being. They listened intently at my story of stealing Sigrid's hormone pills and getting fed up with a lifetime of mendacity that led to my visits to Baltimore and finally accepting that I needed to transition.

I made certain to tell them about how supportive my family seemed to be at that point and how I reluctantly decided to approach the presbytery, aware that this would not be an easy issue with which to deal. I also told them how surprised I was to discover another minister struggling with the same issue in our neighboring presbytery in light of the fact that this issue had never come up in the history of the Presbyterian church. It seemed as though I had been speaking for over an hour, but when I looked at the clock, only fifteen minutes had passed.

Then came the questions. What other courses of action had I taken to try to resolve my gender problem? Was I homosexual? Was I not trying to solve a psychological problem with a surgical procedure? Was not sex reassignment surgery on an otherwise healthy male tantamount to mutilation? Had prayer been a part of my search for a cure? What about psychotherapy? How did my counseling clients react to my changes? The questions came like slugs from a Gatling gun, except they came at me from all directions. The time ran past me like a sprinter and soon the chairman stopped the conversation, announcing that the time the committee had allotted had been used. There were clearly more questions, but I was dismissed with graciousness and the committee's thanks.

As I walked out into the bright light of the Georgia springtime I felt my muscles begin to relax. I had done it! Later that evening one of the committee members, a friend, called and congratulated me. She couldn't tell me what the committee did, but she said that they were impressed with my demeanor and my answers to their questions. A couple of weeks later the committee's report came out with all the other materials that were normally sent in preparation for the presbytery meeting. It was a simple item in

the committee's report stating that they had met with me and considered my request carefully. They had reached a unanimous decision to recommend that the presbytery accept my gender change and record the requested name change. I was amazed.

Pride vs. Parliamentary Procedure

As the date for the summer presbytery meeting approached, the stated clerk called and said he wanted to discuss my presence at the meeting. He emphasized that it was my decision, but he felt that my being at the meeting could be both overwhelming to me and difficult for presbytery members. He suggested that I sit this one out. I thought about it for a moment and decided that I would take his advice, choosing to spend the day at Atlanta's Pride festival instead.

The day for the presbytery meeting arrived and instead of donning my business suit once more, I put on shorts and a cotton blouse and went to Pride Atlanta. It was such a beautiful day that I was immediately thankful not having to sit in a crowded church listening to parliamentary procedure. Pride Atlanta is part of the national gay pride celebrations that take place in cities across the country, usually on the last weekend in June in commemoration of the Stonewall Riots. It happened at a seedy Greenwich Village bar called the Stonewall in late June 1969. The New York police had been raiding various gay bars around the city when, on June 27, the city mourned the death of Judy Garland. Judy's death likely stirred the passions of many gays and in the early morning hours of June 28 the police raided another gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, for the second time that week. As usual the 200 patrons and bar staff were lined up to check identification. As each person was checked they left the bar where they joined a growing throng on the outside cheering and carrying on.

The police detained the staff, three drag queens and two transsexuals. When a paddy wagon came to transport the "offenders" the mood quickly changed and the crowd grew angry — rocks, garbage cans and even a parking meter became missiles thrown through the building's window. Accounts say that 13 were arrested and three police officers were slightly hurt. That evening the crowd reassembled in front of the bar chanting and taunting police only to be disbursed without complication. Later that summer an organization called the Gay Liberation Front formed from the passions of Stonewall. It is a wonderful image for me, that the crowd of gay men and women became enraged that evening because the police were arresting transgender folks. The connection between gender and the Gay Liberation Front, with all its many descendants, has always seemed clear to me.

But this fine summer day in 1995 bore no resemblance to seedy bars or police raids connected with the Stonewall riots. The police scattered throughout the grounds at Piedmont Park seemed to be having as good a time as the tens of thousands of participants. It is called Atlanta Pride, rather than Atlanta Gay Pride because it is intended as a celebration of diversity and inclusion and it certainly lives up to its name. I gazed across the crowd strolling thorough the June sun and saw an image of human community that should make any church proud. There were people holding hands, people of every color, children playing at the feet of parents, folks dressed in colorful campy costume. The atmosphere was simple; it was joy. I wondered what it was like in the air-conditioned sanctuary where the presbytery was meeting and felt thankful again to be here instead. I then forgot about the presbytery meeting altogether because a guy dressed like a cowboy had just walked up to me and clearly wanted to chat...

Later that afternoon Kayla, one of my friends from the local support group, suggested that we leave and do some shopping; she had found a little shop on the outskirts of town and wanted to show it to me. I was filled to the brim with the joy of Pride and it sounded like a good idea to me, so we took off in her van for the suburbs. We had been foraging through the racks of deeply discounted clothing when my pager went off. It was an unfamiliar number, but it reminded me that there were other issues on the day's agenda besides Pride and shopping.



I borrowed the phone sitting on the worn Formica at the checkout counter and called the number. It was Dave, a friend on the committee on ministry. He wanted me to know that there had been a hitch at the meeting. The committee made its report and one presbytery member stood and moved that the item regarding my request be returned to the committee for their continued study. His argument was that my request, that presbytery accept a change in my gender status, was not only irregular but also without precedent. The fact that the presbytery may be setting policy with this decision warranted more careful consideration. Returning the issue to committee would provide more time for study and discussion by the committee and the presbytery as a whole. His argument swayed the vote and my request was back in the hands of the committee.

I was stunned. I had expected either rejection or acceptance and was prepared to deal with either one. I was not prepared to open the issue for continued debate. I had, in fact, expected that the presbytery would reject my request and had planned a vacation with my dad to begin on the Monday following the meeting.

Ministry Through the Media

I was packing for the car trip we were planning to Buffalo to attend a family reunion when my phone rang. It was Gayle White, the Religion Editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She said that she was at the meeting on Saturday and was planning on writing an article for the paper about my request. She explained that she envisioned it as a pro and con style piece, with me on one side of the page and the minister who had opposed me (who just happened to be her pastor) on the other.

The idea made my stomach turn. I was naive about news stories and told her thanks, but I would just as soon not have a newspaper article. I could tell that she sensed my revulsion at the whole idea because her demeanor became warm and supportive. This was news, she explained and she had an obligation to report it regardless of whether I wanted to cooperate or not. She suggested that it was probably in my best interest to give my side of the story rather than have her collect it from outside sources. I told her that I was about to leave town on vacation and couldn't be available to meet with her. We agreed to be in touch by phone later that week.

I had wanted this process to happen quietly and it promised to be anything but quiet. When I called Gayle on Wednesday from my aunt's house in West Seneca, New York, things had changed. It was a conflict of interest, she explained, for her to write such a story because one of the parties was her own pastor. She had turned the story over to Doug Cummings, who would be in touch with me later. They had abandoned the idea of a pro and con story and also decided to delay publishing the story for a while. I was off the hook for the time being.

A letter came from the presbytery office in the heat of the Georgia midsummer. It was a brief note from the Executive Presbyter (the CEO) informing me that another minister in the presbytery had filed a complaint against me and an investigating committee had been formed to look into the charges. I called to find out what the charges were. He said that he could not discuss it with me and that the investigating committee would be in touch with me. I waited. And I waited some more. The presbytery newsletter came out and an announcement was included that an investigating committee had been formed to look in to charges brought against a minister. Chills climbed my spine as I realized that I was the minister in question. But still the committee did not get in touch with me, nor was I informed of the charge against me. I waited more weeks and finally a letter came informing me that the committee had dismissed the charge because the committee on ministry was dealing with the substance of the complaint. They decided that that process should proceed to its conclusion before other remedies were sought. I still didn't know what the charge was, nor was I ever officially told who brought the charge.

Doug Cumming called from the paper and set up a time to come by my office for an interview. Three meetings later and one session with a photographer and the newspaper article was ready for publication.

It didn't appear until Labor Day weekend, but it was a blockbuster for me. A full-page article entitled "Seeking Acceptance," it used interviews with numerous people in the presbytery on both sides of the issue. In some ways it was like a baptism for me: my transgender persona was now a part of public discourse.

I received dozens of notes, letters and phone calls — most of them supportive — in the weeks following the article's publication. Perhaps the most moving contact was from an old woman who wanted to meet me for breakfast. She explained that she had, many years before, gone through a "sex change" in Baltimore and had married, her husband completely unaware of her history. They had lived a lifetime together. After he died she had moved into a retirement home next to a Presbyterian church where she had been attending for many years, often volunteering her musical skills to accompany a women's meeting or a Sunday school class. But she had never joined the church. When I asked her why, her eyes dropped to the floor and she said that she felt unworthy because of her "sex change" operation. "When I saw the article about you, about the minister who was a transsexual, I was overjoyed," she exclaimed, tears in the corners of her eyes. I was stunned; overwhelmed with the decades of brokenness this beautiful old woman had endured. And it wasn't her brokenness — it was the brokenness of the church.

Besides making it possible to find people like her, Doug's article also revealed that I was, as far as he could tell, the first mainstream Protestant minister to ever undergo a sex change while in ordained office. He found other ministers who had or were in the process of gender transition, but they were in smaller denominations that had more liberal traditions. Mainstream ministers who were transgender had all left the ministry in order to transition.

A Few Questions to Answer

As the days of summer began to shorten, the fall meeting of presbytery loomed. I had not met or communicated with the committee on ministry since the summer meeting and I had no way of knowing what they were planning to report. I was in my counseling office on Peachtree Street when the phone rang and Bill, the presbytery executive, had a request. The committee had agreed to assemble questions regarding my gender issues from as many places as they could and had a list. He would be faxing it to me the next day, which was a Friday and the committee expected written responses by the following Wednesday, September 20.

"How many questions?" I asked.

"About forty or fifty," was the reply.

"How in the world can the committee expect me to provide written responses to that many questions in five days?" I exclaimed, incredulous at the magnitude of what they were expecting.

"They are anxious about the presbytery meeting next month and need this in time so they can read them before the meeting on Thursday," Bill said, like this was an adequate explanation for their unrealistic imposition on my time.

Even before I hung up the phone I was looking through my phone book for the name of an attorney friend to call. "Can they require me to do this," I whined, after explaining the predicament I was in.

"Yes. They can," he replied. "But then you don't have to respond unless you want to keep you ordination."

Hearing this made determination race through my body like hot liquid. I was not about to forfeit my ordination because of some outrageous requirement placed in front of me. I pulled out my client list

and called both clients I had scheduled before Wednesday and went home to unwind. I returned to the office the next morning wearing sweats, tennis shoes and the demeanor of a prizefighter in training.

The fax arrived mid-morning. Six sheets with fifty-two questions, many of them hostile and others that looked like questions one might see on a Ph.D. written exam. I decided to spend some time organizing my thinking and read through them all twice, trying to absorb the impact of comments like “self-mutilation” and “deceit.” After awhile I began to see questions that were almost duplicates and many covered similar topics related to scripture, theology, the church, etc... I decided to write my responses as a paper with seven sections, gathering several questions together for a response where possible.

I dove in. I tackled questions about sexual orientation first. The topic of gay and lesbian ministers in the Presbyterian church has been a hot one for several decades and I recognized that there were answers to their questions about my sexual attractions that could place my ordination in jeopardy before even starting on the gender issues.

You seem to indicate that you have not really thought through the question of your sexual orientation after the surgical change. Is it fair to say that any sexual activity on your part as a woman with a female would, at that point, be covered by the church's policy on homosexuality at the time?

This was a sneaky question because it didn't bother to clarify just how the policy on homosexuality would be applied to me. In fact it would be possible to see any intimate relationship with either a man or a woman as homosexual, depending on your perspective on gender transition. I explained that this was still an open issue for me in my therapy and that it was not germane to the topic of my gender change and respectfully declined any further comment.

After moving beyond this booby trap of a question I started like a good Presbyterian with theological and biblical issues. They were exhaustive.

Discuss the Biblical understanding of God's creation of male and female and your own experience. How do you relate your anticipated change to those scriptural passages, which speak of God's knowledge of us from the womb (and thus God's assignment of a gender to each of us)?

I wish that there was time to really study and discover what there is for us in all of these passages. Perhaps even with the turmoil going on around us we will take the opportunity to look together at these.

That God creates us male and female is, to me, a joyful expression of our wonderful differences and the real pleasure that is ours in exploring the “otherness” in God's creation. Of course male and female have often been used to express different aspects of a wholeness, one that can only truly come together in God. I believe that maleness and femaleness are qualities that are part of all of us, part of our deeper nature. This isn't just romantic gibberish, for it is a fact that early in development the embryo contains the potential for becoming either female or male.

With the influence of critical hormonal events, the embryo embarks on its development to ultimately become a man or a woman. It is as if, at one time, gender was not a “like” and “unlike” dimension, but an expression of wholeness that became lost as we developed in our male or female potential. I think that it is also interesting to note that, late in the lifecycle, we lose many of the characteristics that differentiate us as male or female. Women tend to lose their graceful curves and begin to grow facial hair. Men become much softer and even can experience some measurable breast development. It is almost as if our differentiation is a temporary physical and spiritual condition which God corrects in due time.

It is important to note for you that I have no sense that I am some kind of “higher order of being” because I’m transgendered. I do, to be sure, wish to recognize the particular advantages of being transgendered. It has disadvantages as well. The raw truth is that I have probably never really known what it is to be male. I have never experienced, as most of my male friends have, the sheer joy and delight of being a male person. I recoiled from my male puberty and hid from any participation in boyish rituals of passage into manhood. I don’t really know what it is like to have fun dating girls or women as a man. It was always an awkward and painful experience I avoided as much as possible.

Likewise, I will also never really know what it is to be female. I didn’t get to enjoy the gigglish friendship of young girls, nor the mysterious joy of menarche. I will never really know what it is to date boys as a high school or college girl or the joy of emerging womanhood. I will never know what it is to feel the nurturing power in becoming a mother.

The truth is probably that none of us really are able to experience fully the wonderful gift that has been given to us. Mine is the gift of being, in a gender sense, ambidextrous. But to experience this means that I must forego the joys of living fully on either side of the street. I need men and women in my life to teach me what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman. But what I’m becoming really good at is being me. Erin, who is “genderdextrous” in her transgenderism. I can celebrate God’s gift in this and look to that day in the fullness of time when I will know perfect wholeness in the rest of God’s bosom.

I tackled all fifty-two questions like this, taking time off to eat and sleep. By Wednesday morning I had over fifty pages ready. I sat back in my leather desk chair staring at the monitor, wondering how long it was going to take to print all these pages on my old apple printer when my eye fell on the prayer I had hanging over my desk. It was written by Thomas Merton and had been given me by Hal, my father-in-law. It was a prayer of acceptance and thanksgiving and spoke to my heart. I found myself moving naturally into a time of prayerful thanksgiving for all the good years of ministry I had been able to give. I thought about my time at Grady Hospital in the emergency room, about sitting in the isolation room with a young woman in the midst of post-partum psychosis at the state hospital, about the churches I had served. The men and women at what was then called the Georgia Retardation Center emerged from the wall of my office like heavenly apparitions and tears streaked my face. I knew in that moment that God’s gift to me was the gift of pastoring and even if the committee or the presbytery took my ordination from me they could not take God’s gift away from me.

I moved back to the very top of my long paper and copied the words of the Merton prayer and then added a pastoral preamble to the work. It was finished. I made sure that there was adequate paper to feed the old printer, started the printing process and went across the street to the Pancake House for a late breakfast. Later that morning I arrived at presbytery’s office, document in hand, fifteen minutes before the deadline. I then went home and collapsed into my bed and cried myself to sleep without any awareness whatsoever what I was crying about.

Silence, Then Criticism

I half expected that the committee would be calling on me the next afternoon during its meeting to clarify some point or other, so I kept my schedule free. They didn’t call. In fact I heard nothing from the committee until the agenda for the fall meeting came out. There it was, a request to continue study until some future unspecified date. I was heartbroken. I heard nothing more from the committee for the remainder of the year and took special note of the new people who were elected to the committee as we moved into 1996. I wasn’t sure, but it seemed that the new committee had a more conservative bent.

Months began to pass, still without any word or report from the committee. Finally a friend on the committee took pity on me and called after one of their meetings. She said that they had done little



about my request except to take a straw vote on it at each meeting. Each time they voted the committee was split right down the middle, but recently, she said, the “no” votes seemed to be gaining.

In March I went to Neenah, Wisconsin where I had what is euphemistically called “sex reassignment surgery.” I had informed the committee of my upcoming surgery date and had hoped to hear something from them in response. Finally, a month after I returned, I received a letter from Bill telling me “...we have a totally divided committee on ministry so I am afraid that you face an uphill battle.” He sent a compendium of comments from recent committee meetings:

“Her actions and work may help others but the audience is outside the Church.”

“...opted and self-determined a process incomprehensible and unaccepted to the populace at large.”

“We can’t experience her pain but I believe that what she has done has been self-serving without regard to the hurt she has caused her family and the Church. We can continue to love her and sympathize over what she has been through ... without continuing her ordination.”

The criticism was scathing and hurt intensely. It had been an entire year and it seemed that the committee was no closer to understanding than they had been at the start. Maybe even less understanding. I took the letter and drafted another response, which I asked the committee to consider an addendum to the tome I had provided them six months before.

The committee announced at the summer presbytery meeting that it would be making its final report in the fall, in October. The handwriting was on the wall. If the committee could not come to agreement it would make a divided report and instinct told me that a divided report from the committee would bring defeat at the presbytery.

In early August I received a phone call from one of the committee members requesting a meeting with me. She said that she was on a sub-committee that had been appointed to meet with me to see if they could find another way out of this predicament. I agreed to meet and we set a time for her and one other committee member to come to my office.

Three days later they arrived late in the day, after my last client had long gone. I invited them in. She was a minister, a pastor of one of our urban churches that I knew had a large gay and lesbian contingent. He was a Ruling Elder from a suburban church and had a strong reputation as very conservative. I had no idea what to expect. The minister took the lead.

“Erin, the committee has struggled long and hard with your request. We want you to know that we have given this considerable thought and prayer over the past several months. It has taken huge amounts of the committee’s time and energy.”

“I realize that and appreciate the committee’s hard work,” I said, hoping I could delay where I thought this conversation was going.

“Joe and I volunteered to come and meet with you in the hope that we could reason together and save the presbytery time and money,” she said with a smile that made my skin crawl. “You may or may not be aware that in the Presbyterian Church it is customary for ministers who are caught in compromising situations to voluntarily surrender their ordination. For instance if a minister is convicted of a felony his resignation is customarily submitted to protect the church from any damage.”

“I wasn’t aware of that custom,” I said, resentment growing in me for the obvious.

“Well, it has been customary throughout the history of the church,” she said as if delivering a history

lecture. “And the committee on ministry commissioned Joe and me to come and respectfully request your resignation. My heart pounded in my chest. I felt hatred for this woman, a feeling I had not had in years. “Just exactly why are you requesting my resignation? I have not, to my knowledge, committed any crime.”

“It’s not just crimes, but any situation compromising for the minister and, by extension, the church,” her neck was turning crimson.

“And you believe that I am compromising for the church?” I asked, furious.

“Your situation is shameful,” she said, “for yourself and the church. The best thing for all of us would be for you to quietly resign.”

“I don’t believe what I am hearing,” I said. “Has the committee not paid any attention to anything we have talked about over the past year?”

“The fact is that the ministry is no place for a person with your problem,” the redness had climbed all the way to her forehead. “What you have done is against scripture.”

“Are you aware,” I said, “That had the church accepted ‘scripture’ at face value that you would not be ordained today?” I retorted, hoping to find some glimmer of reason in her.

“That’s not the same thing as what you are doing.” She sounded like a child. “You should be thinking about what is best for the church. If you press this you will bring untold suffering on this presbytery. People will leave the church and whole churches may leave because of you.” It was getting nasty.

I closed my eyes and tried to pray for strength and guidance, but nothing happened. My heart was pounding so hard I was certain that they could hear it easily.

“I believe that the church has the responsibility to decide for itself what it will accept and what it will not,” I said trying to catch my breath. “I believe it would be presumptuous of me to decide for the church. I have received a call to ministry and have been ordained by this church. If I am no longer acceptable that is for the church to decide, not me.”

Her eyes bulged from her face in fury. “You have no idea the destruction you will bring down.”

“I guess we will have to find out,” I said, amazed at how calm I had suddenly become.

They left clearly disappointed that they were without the solution they had been commissioned to achieve. I felt disgusted that the committee even considered that I would respond to such a disrespectful request. I had dodged that bullet, but was clearly in trouble.

Getting to Know Me

What bothered me the most was that the committee seemed to be making a decision in the dark. They concerned themselves with questions about the welfare of the church and how my continued ordination would impact presbytery’s already stressed budget and shrink its membership base. I thought about Jesus exhorting us to be willing to lose our life in order to find it and wondered how the presbytery could have strayed so far away from the gospel. I knew that a decision based on ignorance would be very hard for me to accept no matter what way it went.

So I determined that the committee would know as much as possible about the decision they were making and if they wouldn't invite me to committee meetings, then I would go to them. In August 1996 I began setting up one-on-one meetings with each committee member. We met in their homes, offices and over lunch. We prayed, argued, discussed and hugged. By the end of September I had met with fourteen people, all but two of the committee's members.

The outcome of the final committee meeting was not so hidden. It seemed to send shock waves through the entire presbytery. The committee on ministry's report would contain a unanimous decision to sustain or uphold, my ordination as a minister. There was considerable debate at the Presbytery Executive Committee in preparation for the presbytery's upcoming meeting and another vote had been taken. This one wasn't unanimous, but was clearly supportive. The presbytery would receive the committee's unanimous report asking that my ordination as a minister be continued.

As the leaves of Atlanta's beautiful trees began to show the burnished reds and yellows of fall, conservative Presbyterian churches all over the city began to circulate letters in opposition to the committee report. They predicted dire consequences for the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta and even for the entire Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) if I was allowed to continue as an ordained minister. Ministers called me begging me to come to my senses and telling me that they would have to vote against me though they didn't want to, because the viability of their ministries depended on it. In a kind of backward psychology they asked that I resign to keep them from having to vote against their conscience.

The day finally came and the presbytery was gathered at the Shallowford Presbyterian Church in northeast Atlanta. The morning had been carefully choreographed to allow maximum time for discussion while minimizing the ranting that often accompanies controversial votes. Here is the actual "play by play" from the minutes of Presbytery:

At 11:05 A.M. on Tuesday, October 22, 1996 as a Special Order of the Stated Fall Meeting of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, Chair Lloyd Green of the Committee on Ministry introduced the matter of whether or not to continue the ordination of Erin Katrina Swenson.

He reminded presbytery of the earlier recommendation of the Committee on Ministry, which was referred back to the Committee on Ministry. He described the work of the Committee as well as the information that was made available to every member of Presbytery on October 10, 1995.

He described the change of mind that had come to several members of the Committee and referred to the "Rationale" that was distributed three weeks earlier, as well as letters from Erin Swenson, Sigrid Swenson and Hal Lyon.

He then introduced Erin Swenson who made a presentation concerning the decisions and actions that have been made and taken in both life and ministry.

Presbytery then agreed to a time of question and answer for any member of the Committee on Ministry and/or Erin Swenson.

A motion to end this time of question and answer and move to debate and discussion was approved with only a few scattered nays.

The motion before the Presbytery was Recommendation #8 of the Committee on Ministry, "That the ordination and membership in Presbytery of Erin Swenson be continued and that the work of Erin Swenson as a Pastoral Counselor be affirmed as a Validated Ministry."

Richard Jones then presented the following Substitute Motion:

“I move that we postpone consideration of this motion until the Committee on Ministry has provided the presbytery with a thorough analysis of the *biblical, theological* and *constitutional* issues that pertain to its recommendation and afterward has allowed individuals and groups in the presbytery a minimum of two months for study and prayer before being asked to vote.”

After a second was received, debate began on the substitute with rotation of those for and those against. After the question was called and approved, Richard Jones made a final statement. The vote by voice was ruled a defeat of the substitute by the Moderator. A Division was called and the Substitute was defeated by a vote of 197 to 141.

Debate on the main motion began.

A call for the question was approved with only a few scattered nays.

A motion to vote by secret ballot was defeated with only a few scattered nays.

The Main Motion was then approved by a standing vote of 186 to 161, at 12:28 P.M. One person asked to be recorded as abstaining, four persons signed a Dissent and fourteen persons signed the following Protest:

“I, a commissioner to Greater Atlanta Presbytery, wish to protest the action of the Presbytery, to allow Rev. Eric Swenson to change his name to Erin Katrina Swenson, to present himself publicly as a woman and still continue to exercise a ministry validated by the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.

The reasons for my protest are:

1. Rev. Eric Swenson is a father and is genetically a male who is living a life of public deceit by presenting himself as a female and rejecting the gifts of God given him at birth; and
2. This behavior, if left uncensored by the Presbytery, will bring public shame to the gospel and to the Church. (BOC:6:169-6.172; BOO G-6.0106; G-6.01086)

A motion was then approved on a strong voice vote to refer the protest to the Committee on Bills and Overtures with the power to answer it or not, in accord with the Book of Order in behalf of Presbytery.

It feels strange now to read this as if it was just ordinary business carried on by the presbytery. The minutes don't tell about how hard it was for me to look when the vote on the substitute motion was taken or how difficult it was to hear the ugly things some people said during the period of debate and discussion. When the standing vote was taken I kept my eyes on the rustic cross hanging in the front of the sanctuary and prayed for the strength to accept the outcome. I really believed that I would be defrocked that day and so did lots of other people.

I was the first mainstream Protestant minister to transition from one gender to another while in ordained office AND retain ordination.

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WHO DO I SAY THAT I AM?

Jakob Hero

“One of the striking things I am realizing ... is how incredibly messy both love and death are,” writes Jakob Hero as he talks about his own experience as a queer transgender male Christian and reflects on how the experiences of his own ambiguities help him minister to his grandparents in their ambiguities around gender, death and faith.

Multiply Identified

People have been asking me why I am preaching today — it has been pointed out that this is BiSpirit, not TransSpirit Sunday. Well, thankfully Metropolitan Community Church San Francisco tends to be a more enlightened crowd, so I don’t necessarily have to explain that **those letters, L, G, B and T are not mutually exclusive. One is not LGB or T. Transpeople do in fact have sexual orientations and some of us have multiple sexual orientations.**

I could give you a simple answer to this if I had one, but I don’t. I am a transsexual man. I was born female, identified as a lesbian until I was about 23 years old, when I transitioned to male and promptly came out as a gay man. First of all, let me just say that I was a terrible lesbian. I used to get painful crushes on my gay male friends. When I first started living as a man and realized that I could actually date gay men I declared that identity for myself.

What I neglected to acknowledge initially was that in my lesbian years I had truly and deeply loved the women with whom I had been. In my urgency to adopt a fully male life I almost forgot that excited and nervous feeling of falling in love in 11th grade with Ingrid, a fellow member of the girl’s soccer team at my high school. In my eagerness to live up to my gay male identity I shunned the reality of my marriage to Aloha, at 21 years of age — an age when I was far too young to realize that I could not promise myself to another person when I did not even know who I was yet.

But **the reality of who I am is not simply explained away by these labels--**a gay man who used to be a lesbian. I am a person who has loved women and men. I am a man who is partnered with another man. But I am also a person who still loves both women and men. I have embraced, touched, made love to the bodies of men and of women and of people who were living at the various stages between those two sexes. I have loved many different types of people in many different ways.

Multiple Perspectives

I have experienced in my own body a variety of gender realities from a number of different vantage points. I have been called many things, daughter, son, sister and brother. The kids who tormented me in high school called me “dyke.” After college I lived as an illegal alien in Croatia, doing LGBT human rights work. The people who shouted at me in the streets called me *peder*, a Croatian insult for homosexual men. And while not all of these labels still fit me, I would not trade my experience of having worn them — even though they may have felt terribly wrong at the time. Just because I value these experiences does not mean that it has come without cost. There is a little boy in Florida whom I have not been allowed to see for nearly five years now who called me mom. In terms of religious labels — I did not become Christian until college.

In view of all the labels I have been throwing around I invite you to close your eyes and think about: what defines you? Is it who you love, who you sleep with? Do you cease being gay or lesbian

when you are without a date? Does the fact that I am a man who is partnered with another man erase the long history I have of loving women? Even when I date women and dating other people is an accepted part of the covenant I have with my partner, when I date women am I any less queer? I still look and sound and act queer, even if I am holding the hand of someone of the opposite sex.

I have come to find, the older I get, that the things that define me are the experiences I have had, where I have been, what I have done — not the assumptions that other people place on me. Not the neat little packaging people try to give to life. **Who did you say I was, when you first saw me?** Would your opinion have changed if someone had nudged you, pointed in my direction and said, “See that guy over there — he used to be a girl?”

Since I am very open about my trans status, people at this church and at other MCC churches have felt it was okay to ask me **outrageously inappropriate questions** about what is in my pants and how I use the equipment that I may or may not have. Often I think that these questions aren’t literally about my genitalia. I like to think that when someone turns to me during the passing of the peace or while we are singing a hymn and asks me whether or not I have a penis — and yes this happens in this very church — that **they are just trying to better understand where I fit, how to categorize me.**

So when they ask whether I sit or stand when I urinate — and yes people really have asked me that in church — I think they do so in order to feel more comfortable with the feelings of ambiguity that surround an individual who has occupied many different spaces in his life. People are naturally uncomfortable with anything that seems different or quite literally, queer. I believe that God called me to be queer. I see the evolution of my sexual orientation throughout my life as evidence, not of my own depravity as some might argue, but of God’s intention for me to be a person who is oriented toward a variety of sexual attractions. I believe that God called me to be queer. But being queer is not just about who you take to your bed. It is about how you relate to the world, how you present yourself and the choices you make — your internal sense of self.

Life is Messy!

I am at an interesting time in my life now. I have gone beyond my ‘coming out’ stage of my teen years, the self-obsessed years of my transition and the coming-out-again stage of my twenties. Now that I am rather comfortable at the stage I am at in life, I have found that suddenly I have the time and energy to focus on things that don’t necessarily have to do with my sex or gender.

I am deeply enmeshed in the end-of-life care of my grandparents, Nickie and Andrew Hero. They are rather interesting folks: they are atheists and bikers who owned a Harley Davidson shop for 50 years or so. The local priest in the small Alabama town where they live has been coming by for the last couple of years for regular visits, in order to put *“the fear of the Lord”* in them. One of the blessings of my grandmother’s dementia is that she no longer obsesses about the destination of her soul after each of his visits.

The priest is sent over by my extended family, all of whom practice a strange hybrid of Catholicism and Southern fundamentalist Christianity that comes right out of the Louisiana bayou country and exists in pockets all over the Gulf Coast. As I watch the painful process my grandparents are going through, I do believe that faith could be helpful to them in this time of their lives. But the Catholic Church has hurt them and, my grandfather especially, cannot reconcile with the legalistic religion of his youth. Here I am reminded of the devastating effects of the fear-based rhetoric that shapes much of Christian theology which functions as a type of spiritual terrorism in the lives of anyone who does not fit into the traditional concept of “Christian.”

One of the striking things I am realizing as I care for my grandparents is **how incredibly messy both love and death are.** I literally have never known a couple — gay or straight — who is more in love than

these two and this complicates the dying process, as neither wants to let go of the other; especially because, as atheists, they believe that there is nothing after this life. But Nickie suffers from severe dementia and each day the woman who she once was gets replaced more and more by a sad, confused and often angry stranger.

My mentally-sound grandfather (whom everyone just calls “Hero”) clings to her, hoping that his failing heart and kidneys will hold out just long enough for Nickie to never have to be alone. I use their lives as an example, not just because I just spent the majority of my summer vacation at their house, but also because they embody two things that I believe are necessary to explore in the context of queerness and faith: fear and gender expectations.

Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid.

I believe that it was fear that drove both of them away from the church; fear of being controlled, fear of doing the ‘wrong’ thing, fear of the judgment of a scary God who watches your every move. **Fear is a motivating force for many people to ‘come to Christ,’ but it also drives countless others away from the church. I think this is especially true for queer people and anyone who does not conform to normative gender expectations.**

It has been gender expectations — or more precisely gender ambiguities — that have always defined my grandmother and, by extension, the man who has adored her for the last 65 years. Nickie is a tough woman who up until relatively recently had amazing physical strength, rode her own motorcycle and generally disrupted the stereotype of a typical woman. Nickie and Hero do not see themselves as transgressive and certainly not as queer or even as feminists. However, the ways that they have always subverted expected gender norms have made them feel that their lives were fundamentally incompatible with most of the church-going folks that they knew. To put it bluntly, the way that Nickie looked, dressed and acted made it impossible for the two of them to conform and to blend. They were not welcome in many social contexts, especially the church.

Many of us are also are totally unwilling to acknowledge the physical reality of where we will end up when our bodies begin to fail us. The end of life is messy. It is ugly. It usually involves unpleasant smells. And often it is a degrading process. In light of these facts, **what would it mean to “queer” the dying process?** Both cognitive and physical disabilities mean that we must re-learn how to relate to the world, how to function and how we will eventually approach our last days. No matter how ready a person might think he or she is to face his or her mortality, it is a rare person who does not find this process uncomfortable, awkward or in some way *queer*.

A primary draw of the fear-based forms of Christianity in my view is the “us” verses “them” terminology. People experience these teachings from the position of “saved” and feel justified in celebrating the exclusive place of comfort they will go to, while others suffer on earth for not having true faith in Jesus Christ as the one true Lord. As a queer Christian I certainly am not alone in experiencing the rejection and judgment from LGBT and queer people who are totally exhausted by the fear-based rhetoric used to discriminate against them. **I think that this rhetoric is why there have even been times when I felt more judged by my non-Christian queer-identified friends than from straight Christians.** I think that it comes from a fear of judgment. The people with whom I share sexual or gender minority status feel that they risk more in talking to a Christian than a Christian feels she or he has at stake in talking to a queer person. Of course, this is anecdotal and a generalization, but it is based on many years of experience and heartbreak, as I have tried to decipher how to navigate through the world as a queer person of faith.

While my grandparents would never conceptualize their peculiar relation to binary gender expectations as being *queer*, the way that they have responded to my Christianity is nearly identical to the reactions of

my LGBT friends, especially those who — like my grandparents — knew me before my conversion to Christianity. Once I started to call myself a Christian a wall was put up between us. It is important to note here, that I am not talking about the same kind of hesitant reaction that family or life-long friends have to any major change a person undergoes — I mean, it wasn't easy for them either when I came out as gay or when I transitioned.

But in the case of my spiritual evolution I found in them and in others a profound sense of betrayal, where I have suddenly been placed in the category of “them” and no longer one of “us,” the latter camp being rational and trustworthy and the former being superstitious and judgmental. And while Nickie and Hero are blind to the clear overlap between her gender performance and a lack of acceptance in the predominantly Christian society they belong to, they certainly have seen some of their family members turn their backs on me because of my transition from female to male. Nickie has experienced similar rejection throughout her life because of her own gender performance and as a result they have both always been hyper-sensitive to anyone who might potentially judge them, another trait they share with the LGBT and queer communities.

Returning to the Familiar

An interesting thing about Nickie's dementia is that she recently developed a desire to return to the familiar patterns of her childhood. I was totally shocked to see that the priest now brings her communion on Sundays. Although what I have read about dementia says that picking up old patterns from childhood is a typical behavior, I was surprised to see this self-avowed atheist turn to the priest who used to come over and upset her. I do not think it is even remotely coincidental that she is now able to take Catholic communion and she also happens to be too frail to participate in any of the gender transgressive behaviors that made her unwelcome in the church.

I also know that this is not simply about appreciating patterns from childhood. On some level she is doing this because she knows that the end of her life or at least the end of her ability to speak and function, is near. I am not sure whether this points to the fact that the scare tactics have finally “worked” or not. But what I do know is that while the priest sees this as a win for his side of some ongoing contest, I do not think that an 84-year-old woman with severe dementia accepting a wafer on her tongue is any sort of victory for Christianity, especially in light of the 70 or so years of fear and spiritual isolation that preceded this death-bed conversion.

To me this is reminiscent of the return to Christianity that so many people experienced during the so-called “AIDS years.” Part of the oral history of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (which is shared by those who were here in the late 1980s and early 1990s) is the story of the hundreds of sick people who joined or started attending MCCSF just before their deaths. At the time, Revs. Jim Mitulski and Penny Nixon shared the pulpit and, with that, the responsibility of doing about one memorial service every single day.

In a lecture I attended during a course on queer religious leadership at Episcopal Divinity School last summer, Mitulski shared with us that, **as many of these men approached death and came to MCCSF for refuge, it was not MCCSF or even their families, to whom they left their estates, but the churches of their childhood.** He told us this was almost always done with the urging of these churches and that these same churches would accept their estates but then refuse to give these men Christian burials because of how they died.

“This Is Not Who I Am”

With this in mind I would like to return to my previous suggestion about the queering of the dying process, particularly in the context of ministry as a necessary component of end-of-life care. What is the real meaning of end-of-life care? Is a last-minute conversion to Christianity really the goal at all? And traditionally what has been the *real* motivation of these conversions?

My grandmother called me to her side one evening a few weeks ago, not by what she said, but with the way she looked over at me as I sat at the kitchen table reading. I put down my book and came over to sit next to her. She called me by my brother's name, then she called me "Joe" — she knew it wasn't quite right, but she settled on that name. "Joe, **don't remember me like this. This is not who I am. I am not some frail old lady.**"

As she fought against her current identity, based on the biological reality of the current state of her body, I finally realized *why* I understood how she was feeling. **She is in transition and my queer experience as a person who has transitioned among sexual orientations and gender identities gives me empathy for her situation.** Nickie told me that she is not the woman her body tells her she should be. Her true identity is that of the strong, powerful, woman she once was.

My connection to her current situation has everything to do with timing: it is about believing yourself to be the person you once were or the person you know you will become. Many years ago I was in the body of a young woman but knew that I was not the woman society expected me to be, I was the man I would become. I just had not become that person yet, but I knew I would be. I knew *that* was the *real* me, even when I was not yet sure what that reality would be like. I did not *become* that man by taking hormones or having surgeries. **I became the man I am by believing — by truly knowing — that was who I was and who I would always be.**

The biological fact of my female birth sex did not have to dictate the gender performance of the rest of my life, the way I behaved, who I fell in love with, what I would call myself. Even back when I did not yet look or sound like a man, the internal ontological reality of my identity was male. I did not need facial stubble or a flat chest to dictate that reality. I *already* knew myself to be male. The people who loved me called me by my chosen name and when they spoke of me they used male pronouns, even though it was terribly hard for them to remember to do so, since I did not yet *look or sound* male. They constructed a reality for me in which I was a man, regardless of the "essential" nature of my birth sex. They recognized the real me and eventually I was able to use modern medical technology so that my body could catch up with my identity.

The queer reality of the end of life is that we start to experience every part of life in a way that feels foreign and strange. Our bodies no longer live up to the fundamental realities of who we know ourselves to be. Just as I felt that my body had been hijacked by breasts and menstruation, Nickie's has been hijacked by a list of ailments too lengthy to describe here.

As I sat by Nickie that night I noticed she had started "twilighting" — a typical trait of dementia in which the patient gets increasingly more and more confused the more tired they get. She was trembling, as she often does. I covered her with a blanket and she mumbled something about World War II. Keeping in mind the importance of the realities we construct for ourselves, I was reminded that not all constructed realities are bad. I chose to take on the role of male, I *became* a man. And I am grateful for the biological realities of testosterone that have changed the way I relate to the world. **I believe that we do not have to shun something that makes us feel whole and alive just because in a certain context it may be "constructed."** If there were an injection or a surgery that could fix Nickie, I would travel to the end of the earth so she could have it.

I put my hand over Nickie's and I helped reconstruct a reality for her with stories she has told me throughout my life. I told her that she was a riveter in an airplane factory during the war and that she was lucky that Hero's motorcycle accident had kept him from having to go off and fight. She said out loud the name of the airplane factory where they both worked. I told her that she loves to climb inside the nose of the planes she helps to build. She told me it was the weight of the rivet gun that was making her hands shake. She imitated the noise the gun makes and fell asleep with a big, beautiful, smile on her face.

I sat there with her in that queer place and I cried while she slept. For her there was nothing constructed about that reality. She was back in 1943. She was younger than I am today. In many ways I can see that she has already slipped away from us and no matter how much I try to theorize this situation, as I look at Nickie all I can think of is how messy the end really is and how meaningless all of these self imposed labels are when we reach the end of our time on earth. This is the mess that is caused by love and death, not just in its wake, but also in its presence, as we know (and even hope) that the end is near.

Leave Nothing Behind

So what does all of this mean? I hope that on Bispirit Sunday as we come together as a family of faith to worship together in this space, that each of us can consider the significance of the relationships we have with one another. We can come to this space as people who love one another, people who have relationships, both platonic and sexual, that we honor the space we create with each other here.

I would challenge you to remember the relationships you have had in your lives, before you ‘became’ what you are today. Those of you who have had previous heterosexual marriages, remember your previous loves. I challenge you to love the people you were with who you are not with today. But what’s more, I challenge you to love the person you used to be. **You do not have to go through a gender transition to feel detached from your own pasts. But the path you walked, no matter how tumultuous, brought you to this space. God called you on that path and God brought you here. By honoring yourself you honor God.** I challenge you to think of those bodies you have held in your arms — we are a community that is defined by who we hold onto.

Who do you say I am? I tell you that I am a man who loves other men. I am a man who loves women. I am a parent to a child I am not allowed to see, to hold. I am someone who has held in my arms the frail body of someone I love, someone who used to be so vibrant and prayed that God take her away, to end my grandparents’ suffering. I have held people who are no longer with us. The people I have held, the experiences I have tucked into my heart, are probably not all that different from what you have tucked in yours. And this, above all else, tells me that I am and that we are children of God.

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