

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Sunday, April 2nd, 2017
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman
“Singing the Body Electric: A Reflection on Transgender”

*This sermon was framed by Walt Whitman’s poem: “I Sing the Body Electric”,
and by Fred Small’s song “Everything Possible”,
found as #1019 in the teal hymnal supplement, “Singing the Journey”,
also Whitman’s reading “For You”,
found as #659 in the grey hymnal, “Singing the Living Tradition”.*

An excerpt from Whitman’s poem, “I Sing the Body Electric” invited the meditation.

*The Story for Ages was “The Man with the Violin”, by Kathy Stinson and Dusan Petricic, with a
postscript by Joshua Bell, reminding us to look more carefully, to look below the surface, and
most of all, to listen to one another.*

“Singing the Body Electric: A Reflection on Transgender”
Rev. Fran Dearman, April 2nd, 2017, Olinda, Ontario.

Con-tin-u-um. From the Latin, mid Seventeenth Century.

A continuous sequence in which adjacent elements may not be perceptibly different from each other, although the extremes are quite distinct. A coherent whole characterized as a collection, sequence, or progression of values or elements varying by minute degrees. Something that changes in character gradually or in very slight stages, something that keeps on going, changing slowly over time, like the continuum of the four seasons.

In addition to meaning “a whole made up of many parts,” continuum, can describe a range that is always present, a continuous series of elements or items that vary by such modest differences that they do not seem to differ from each other but the extremes are quite distinct, for example, a continuum of special educational needs.

Binary—either/or—something having two parts.

Continuum—a whole made up of many parts. Both and.

Continuum

When I was at university, I spent a lot of time trying to understand what my professors meant when they spoke of modernism, post-modernism, structuralism, deconstruction, post-structuralism. English literary criticism made me dizzy. One explanation finally emerged that I

could get a handle on: that once there was one way to be, one truth, one centre; but now we recognize many truths, many ways, and we listen harder to the voices at the margin.

We listen harder to the voices at the margin. Including those perceived as ‘other’ by a divergence of sex, gender or sexual orientation.

At birth, one is assigned a sex on the basis of presenting genitalia, the flesh of the body, and that is the sex written on the birth certificate—male or female, but perhaps somewhere on the continuum between. Mother Nature delights in variety. In time, gender emerges—internal, not necessarily visible to others, not necessarily in tune with cultural expectations; as Simone de Beauvoir once said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Culture drives gender expectations to some extent.

Even so, there appear to be strong genetic factors determining how we feel about gender, also. A person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender—their internal sense of being a man, woman, or another gender entirely, may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth. In time, the growing individual may come to perceive their sexual identity, assigned at birth, does not match the gender identity they feel to be genuinely, authentically, comfortably their own.

Beyond that is the question of sexual orientation: one’s capacity for profound emotional and sexual attraction to another person based on their sex and/or gender.

Love is a many splendored thing.

In the last few years, we humans have become more precise in how we describe the human condition in these matters of sexual flesh, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

I would commend to you the Wikipedia website, also an online resource called “the Genderbread Person” for a discussion of vocabulary, also Egale Canada for Canadian statistics and a basic terminology guide. A bibliography will be found below.

This morning I will speak of one specific diversity, namely transgender.

I choose to speak of transgender persons this morning because a long-time colleague in the Pacific Northwest, someone you will likely never meet, once took a year of unpaid sabbatical, while making the transition from one gender to another. And thinking of my colleague, I began to do the math, and I realized that in the course of the last twenty years I had encountered more than twenty transgender persons. And I don’t get out much.

And how many more? How many people do I walk past each day, never knowing how they feel about their true selves, how their inner sense of self differs from the face they show me?

On anecdotal evidence alone I reckoned this was something I needed to wrap my head around. Do I need to understand before I can accept? Perhaps. And perhaps that is not fair. Neither you

nor I can understand why we have the sexual identities we have—we don't have to understand why someone is gay or straight in order to accept them as a person, nor they us. Must we understand why someone is transgender in order to welcome them?

Fair or not, perhaps I can feel more confident in my welcome, if I have more understanding.

Full disclosure: I must concede that I am a bear of very little brain, and I am easily spooked. So it takes an effort on my part to learn to understand this continuum of genders. It's not something I feel entirely comfortable, wrapping my mind around. But I must.

There are people I love, for whom this is their ever present reality. So I must make the effort. I met a person twenty years ago who was transgender, a person of rare dignity, living their life as best they could. So I must. I have admired the colleague I spoke of for many years. And this is my colleague's reality. So I must.

I am not always a very nice person. At times I find myself fearful and disturbed by some diverse reality. But to love someone is to acknowledge that they are real, like myself, feel joy and pain, seek wholeness in their lives. So I must.

Even as I empathize, even as I respect and acknowledge my colleague's search for true identity, I must also recognize and acknowledge my own true feelings. I need to own my own fears, and then set my fear and discomfort to one side, so I can be truly present to my friend. I acknowledge my own fear and discomfort, respect it for what it is, and set it aside.

I acknowledge that there are religious issues here. Identity is a religious issue—who am I?

But I am not my colleague. And my colleague's sense of who he is, she is, does not endanger my sense of who I am, even when the answer touches on so primal an element as gender.

I acknowledge that for me there is a religious issue here. I am attracted to the idea of *imago dei*—that we are made in the image of the holy, the image of god. Trees, rocks, bunnies, humans, all bearing and sharing the image of the holy.

My colleague was a very handsome man—the image of the holy. How can he bear to –distort? reshape—that holy image? But if his mind is truly only true and holy in the altered image, is that not the image of the holy, also?

What does the science say?

I grew up before the OWL programme—our whole lives. I grew up before the AYS programme—about your sexuality. I am a simple girl from the country. But I am fortunate in my colleagues, who are very smart and who have given the nuance of sex and gender much thought.

The Reverend Allison Barrett very graciously shared with me a sermon she had written in 2005, engaging the topic of gender in general, and transgender in particular.

Allison writes:

“It begins before you are born..... about 20 days after conception.

The human embryo, [as] many of you may know, begins female in all of us.

[Then], in about 51 % of the cases, [the embryo] receives a tiny message (which we don't yet fully understand) almost like a trainman at the switch, telling it, in effect to take a different track—the track that leads to becoming a male. This message needs to be sent to both the cells that will go on to form the body and the cells that will go on to form the brain.

Since female is the “fallback” position... unless [this twenty day message triggers] the development of the male, the fetus will be female. If this switch does not occur, the girl train continues down the track, a few months later an ultrasound tells the waiting world what it wants to know, and the parents begin to get a lot of little pink gifts, teddy bears and dolls. If that engineer flips the switch, it's blue blankets, [hockey pucks], and [sports cars on] the bedroom wallpaper. From before we are born, our society's ideas about gender are imposed onto our tiny 20 day old bodies.

From there on in, it's almost impossible to sort out “nature and nurture,” although many have tried. Who would we be if no one told us we were male or female?

[N]ature tells us that gender categories are fuzzier than we think, and that sexuality in all its diverse forms bursts forth in many splendored ways all over the animal and plant world. Then does gender matter at all? The answer is Yes..... [F]or some the idea of gender identity feels literally like a matter of life and death. Transgender people suffer from societal misunderstanding more than from any angst about their true nature, which often appears to them quite early.

[S]ome transgender persons conceal the inner person and live life in the outer body, the body that doesn't fit. Some simply dress as they feel comfortable. Some make a more radical adjustment, including hormone treatment, and perhaps reconstructive surgery.] [I]t's not easy making a life-altering change like gender re-assignment. Or as one [male to female] trans woman said “The surgery wasn't a problem—[what I wasn't ready for was] the drop in pay!”

And so a transgender person grows up with the sense of being a woman trapped in a man's body, or a man trapped in a woman's body. Or even something beyond that. The nuances of gender, as manifest in flesh, as lived out in culture, are myriad, diverse, and an anthropologist's dream.

The science tells us that the human rainbow displays a broad range of human gender expression, endlessly diverse, more a continuum than a polarization. Diverse in sex and gender. Diverse in how that is lived out, in different cultures and over time. Diverse in how each person lives out their own life. Some speak of Two-Spirited persons. Some speak of a third gender all together.

So the science tells me that my colleague is living out the *imago dei*, the manifestation of what it means to be a whole and holy human being, a being of inherent worth and dignity, in his, now her, own way. Their own way.

The mission statement of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax, whom I served when I first began to write and re-write this sermon, voiced this purpose: to provide a community that nurtures personal and spiritual growth, practices inclusiveness, celebrates diversity and affirms individual and collective commitment to community service and social justice.

So there, we tried to make a safe place where a person can grow into their best self. Our support for one another is a great gift—even a simple hallo, good morning, how are you? Transgender persons can be terribly isolated. A safe place, where one is welcomed, every Sunday, could be a life-saver. I do not say this lightly. Transgender persons are vulnerable to attack, especially, it would seem, in an election year.

And then there's the matter of finding a place to pee in the public arena. How can one move freely in one's own city if one has to dance through hoops to find a bathroom?

Recent political initiatives in the United States have attempted to legitimize discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender person—to make it legal to not serve someone because they are different. Much like the old Jim Crow laws that made it legal to discriminate against persons of colour. Institutionalized double standards. Legalized bigotry.

Large corporations fight back by withdrawing their money-spinning business enterprises from states where their employees will be thus discriminated against. Meanwhile, the United States Army is trying to figure out how to manage an inclusive transgender policy and thus retain the skills of highly qualified personnel. Hey—you pour half a million dollars into training someone into a rare skill set, you want to hang on to them! Can't be that difficult to find them uniform that fits and somewhere to pee!

We can be nuanced in our courtesies to one another. Not all transgender persons are the same. They might be used to a lot of questions, or not. They might be more or less outgoing. They might be more or less comfortable saying, thank you for your interest, this is what I'm okay to talk about, this is what I'm not okay to talk about.

Pronouns are important. When in doubt, ask.

As with the rest of us, sex or gender or transgender does not describe all we are. A transgender person is not reduced to that category alone—like us, they will likely have many interests. We could ask about that.

Here in this church we make room for our rituals, our joys and sorrows, our rites of passage. And here, when we bury our dead, we can bury them with the open acknowledgement of the fullness of their humanity.

The Rev. Katie Stein Sather has been pastor to three transgender persons.

Katie relates:

The most recent transitioning person, I knew as male first. A very likeable chap, [who was absent from church for a time.] When he did come back, he phoned me up to say **she** wanted to come to church. I invited her to come, to light a candle of Joy, and tell her story very briefly. She was totally surrounded after the service with well-wishers.

Katie writes: "Getting to know any person, whether in transition or not, depends on both you and the other person. Openness helps. Trust helps. Knowledge helps. But it is the willingness to look beyond my feelings of discomfort, and unease when the body language doesn't quite match the body you see so I can answer the question, "To what degree am I able to affirm this person as they see themselves?"

My stated principles helped me through those occasional moments of discomfort. Human nature did the rest.”

Katie quotes teacher and theologian Parker Palmer, who writes:

The act of knowing is an act of love...the act of entertaining and embracing the reality of the other or allowing the other to enter and embrace our own...

Here is the insight most central to spiritual experience: we are known in detail and depth by the love that created and sustains us, known as members of a community...that depends on us and on which we depend.

I close with these words, Allison Barret citing her colleague Jean Rowe: “We have a calling in this world. We are called to honour diversity, to respect differences with dignity, and to challenge those who would forbid it. We are people of a wide path. Let us be wide in affection And go our way in peace.

So may it be.

Bibliography:

Materials on Walt Whitman may be found at a public library near you; Leamington Public Library holds two helpful, slim volumes of biography and analysis, both of which I recommend: David S. Reynolds, “Walt Whitman”, 2005 (811.3 Rey), and Harold Bloom, ed., “Walt Whitman”, 1999 (811.3 Whi)

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Thanks to GT for drawing to my attention a documentary TV film on a DNA cluster in the Dominican Republic by which some children transform from one gender to another at adolescence:

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