

Gender Bending
Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington
November 30, 2008
Rev. Paul Ratzlaff

Pastoral Prayer:

We’ve had our fill of turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, cranberry relish and pumpkin pie and all the accoutrements of Thanksgiving. In our gratitude, some of us experience a creative, sustaining presence for the many gifts we have received. We direct our thanksgiving to God. Others of us look for natural explanations. We direct our thanksgiving to the universe. Yet others of us leave the origins mysterious. We are simply thankful. But however we direct our feelings of thankfulness, we are all thankful especially as we reflect on the relative bounty that we enjoy.

Even so we remember those who grieve this season. There were empty spaces at the table. We hold in compassion those among us and beyond who mourn that vacuum. We extend our compassion to those terrorized by rogue forces in Mumbai. We suffer with those who suffer from violence at whatever level, personal, familial, community, national or the world.

We recognize that we don’t always live in accord with the ideals that we aspire to. Where we know that we have caused injury, may we be courageous in seeking forgiveness. And may we be open to the reality that sometimes we cause injury without meaning to do so. May we welcome kindly learning from others about how they receive our words and our actions. And may we be generous in forgiving those who offer us their apology.

Even as we acknowledge our shortcomings, we recommit ourselves to the ideals by which we would live – the ideals that make for the kind of community in which all live fully and well. We would be loving, truth-telling, courageous and compassionate. May we continue to strive to live our lives by that which calls us to our best and highest selves. Amen.

Sermon

During World War II, Mrs. Anderson decided to celebrate Thanksgiving by having several soldiers in as guests. She called the neighboring army base, was connected with one of the first sergeants, and asked that three soldiers be sent to her house the following Thursday.

“And Sergeant,” she added, “I do not wish for any of them to be Jewish.”

“I understand, ma’am,” said the sergeant.

Came Thursday and on Mrs. Anderson’s doorstep stood three fine-looking black soldiers in spotless uniforms. “We’re here for Thanksgiving, ma’am,” said one of the soldiers politely.

Mrs. Anderson, eyes wide, sputtered, “But-but-but-your sergeant must have made a mistake.”

“No, ma’am,” said the black positively. “Sergeant Cohen doesn’t make mistakes.”¹

As we become more sophisticated we realize that much of what we take for granted as “normal” is, in fact, culturally constructed. Rather than thinking “that’s the

¹ Isaac Asimov’s *Treasury of Humor*, 1971, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA, 297.

way it is”, and assume that it is so for all peoples in all times, we begin to appreciate, “that’s the way it is - in the American culture.”

With the election of the first African American president, we begin to hear widespread questions. “If his mother was white, and his father Kenyan, why does that make him black?” “Shouldn’t it make him half-white?” “Why doesn’t he identify as ‘white’?” In a congregation that I served, the daughter of interracial parents lamented that the choices in her identity were much too limited. She herself married a “white” man. What did that make her children? It’s clear that black and white are cultural constructions. They mean certain things in our American culture. Skin color has no inherent meaning; no meaning apart from the meaning our culture gives it. As many have observed, if you line up so-called “white” people side by side, what you actually see – if you look with a painter’s eyes – is an incredible range of coloration. (And, of course, the same is true with so-called “black” people.) Years ago, I heard a rock band in Atlanta, Georgia, that was called “So-and-so (the name of the band leader whose name I’ve forgotten) and the Colored People.” Imagine our surprise when we saw band members who had painted themselves green and blue and purple. They were making fun of the cultural construct “colored people.”

Today, I would like to suggest that the dominant way of thinking about gender is also culturally constructed, and that human experience is much more varied and fluid than the dominant construct. Some among us today understand this in their bones, so to speak. They are the ones on the journey to find their authentic self, assigned roles be damned. My sermon today is really aimed at the majority of us who have assumed the gender roles assigned us to be “natural.” Gender may be so deeply embedded that we aren’t aware of the power of culture to influence our thinking to such a degree that we fail to understand that what is has been constructed. We think it “natural.”

It may be easier to understand “race” as culturally constructed, than gender. But I’d like for us to entertain the possibility that gender is also constructed by culture. In America, we put such emphasis on “is it a boy or a girl?” That’s among the first questions we ask when a baby is born – or puppies or kittens. We take for granted that one is born with a certain, unalterable gender. We assume that anatomy makes for destiny. We get very uncomfortable with the pronouncement, “gender/sex unspecified – to be determined.” Obstetricians panic; making quick decisions about gender assignment.

But this kind of either/or, fixed forever, thinking about gender, is not the way that many other humans have experienced the mystery of gender. While many of us have been acculturated so that we think our way is the real way, the only way, many other humans have lived with a much more varied and fluid concept of gender.

One would think that any rigidly bifurcated understanding of reality misses the complexity and the variation of living forms. Just as there is incredible variety and range of hair types, to take by one example of human characteristics, so one would expect there to be variety and range of gender. Imagine a compass needle that only pointed north or south. It would not be a very accurate device. Thinking of gender expression as either/or may likewise not be very accurate.

Other cultures get this. For example, throughout the Middle East before the time Jesus lived, the Great Mother was worshipped. One might think that the Great Mother was a woman, but that might reflect forcing it into the categories that we westerners are comfortable with. Remember, it must be a boy or a girl. There’s evidence to suggest that the Great Mother was both male and female. “Roman historian Plutarch described the

Great Mother as an intersexual (hermaphroditic) deity in whom the sexes had not yet been split.”² How about that! To have an image of deity that includes both. Hindu mythology is also more fluid in its symbolic depiction of the ultimately real. There is a form of Siva that is both male and female.

Moreover the Great Mother was served by transsexual priestesses. (It’s revealing to think of castration not as self-mortification, but as an early form of “transitioning.”) The Great Mother was found in many forms found throughout the region, whether Diana, Artemis, Atargatis, Ashtoreth or Ishtar.

Last spring at Gay Pride Sunday, you heard about the Native American tradition of the two-spirits. Isn’t it fascinating in these societies, people who crossed gender lines were revered by the community. In those cultures, people believed that two-spirited specialness gave them access to the divine. What a tragedy that our culture fears the transgendered among us, so that instead of reverence, they are too often reviled and hunted down.

I want to read an extended quote from Leslie Feinberg’s interview with Spotted Eagle, a two-spirited person that took place off the reservation in Georgia.

“I was born in 1945,” Spotted Eagle told me. “I grew up totally accepted. I knew from birth, and everyone around me knew I was Two-Spirited. I was honored. I was a special creation; I was given certain gifts because of that, teachings to share with my people and healings....”

There were no distinct pronouns in her ancient language, she said. “There were three variations: the way the women spoke, the way the men spoke, and the ceremonial language. Which way of speaking did she use? “I spoke all three. So did the two older Two-Spirit people on my reservation.”

Spotted Eagle explained that the White Mountain Apache nation was small and isolated, and so had been less affected early on by colonial culture.... “We were a matriarchy and have been through our history. Women are in a different position in a matriarchy than they are out here. It’s not that we have more power or more privilege than anyone else, it’s just a more balanced way to be. Being a woman was a plus and being Two-Spirit was even better. I didn’t really have any negative thoughts about being Two-Spirit until I left the reservation.”

Spotted Eagle told me that as a young adult she married. “My husband was also Two-Spirit and we had children. We lived in a rather peculiar way accord to standards out here. Of course it was very normal for us. We faced a lot of violence, but we learned to cope with and go on.”

Spotted Eagle’s husband died many years ago. Today her partner is a woman. Her three children are grown. “Two of them are Two-Spirit,” she said proudly. “We’re all very close....”³

Chrystos, a Menominee poet, observed:

The whole concept of gender is more fluid in traditional life. Those paths are not necessarily aligned with your sex, although they may be. People might choose their gender according to their dreams, for example. So even the idea that your gender is something you dream about is not even a concept in Western culture – which posits you are born a certain biological sex and therefore there’s a role you must step into and follow pretty rigidly for the rest of your life. That’s how we got the concept of queer. Anyone who doesn’t follow their assigned

² Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 1996, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 40.

³ *Ibid*, 28.

*gender role is queer; all kinds of people are lumped together under that one word.*⁴

Mindful of these examples, we can begin to appreciate that gender is determined not by anatomy, but by culture. It is culturally constructed.

The Chinese gave us the wonderful symbol of the Tao, light and dark, interlocking teardrops that make a whole. If you’ve studied the symbol, you will note that traditional images have a “seed” of the other in their dominant color, so there is a small circle of dark in the field of white, and, conversely, a seed of light in the field of dark. The depth psychologist Karl Jung likewise theorized that we each have in us a part of our psyche that represents the opposite gender. In his terms, males have within their psyches the “anima” and females the “animus.”

In reflecting on the mystery of gender expression, I invite us to visualize different images of the Tao. Some would have less sharp demarcation between the sides; some would be colored so that one part fades into another. Some would have many “parts.” Even better some would be dancing Taos – not fixed in their ratio of light and dark, but changing, transforming. That may be a more accurate map to the complexity of human experience.

At the very least, I urge you to acknowledge the mystery that is gender and sexuality, in all its variations.

May we recognize that some constructions are more effective maps than others, guiding us to better appreciate the range and diversity of human experience. Some maps are way too limited. We may need to discard them as they have outlived their usefulness. May the maps that we use to guide us serve us well in honoring the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.

⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

A Little Help From My Friends – and Martin Luther King.....

The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.

Martin Luther King

In the late summer of 2005, a small band of transgender activists met with Reverend Paul, to see if the Fellowship would be willing to hold the Transgender Day of Remembrance here. I was impressed by Reverend Paul’s willingness to host the memorial, but more importantly, by his message of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. I remember mentioning that I was looking for a spiritual home, and I wondered if his congregation would truly be up for it. I can still see him smiling, saying he believed that most of the congregation would indeed “walk the walk”.

For the next 3 years, I would experience what it means to be a part of the Unitarian Universalist family. I can firmly say that my time here has been the most spiritual and supportive of my life. I have greatly appreciated how each of you have accepted me as a person, and when I speak to other members of the Transgender Community, I always point out that they need to experience a UU spiritual life.

However, I need to make you aware that the person you see before you today is not a good example of who transgender people are. My gender dysphoria never seriously held me back, never created the ‘all or nothing’ drive to physically change my gender, and never caused me to face the hatred that most other transgender people face. I have enjoyed the ‘White Male Privilege’ that most other people in my community lack. I had success as a young boy, success as an athletic teenager, and success in my adult career. I only wish that the gifts I received could be transferred to other members of my community.

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

Martin Luther King

Transgender People live their lives in a *shallow way*, afraid of discovery, afraid of rejection, afraid of the potential loss of anything that they have earned and worked for. Suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, homelessness, unemployment and divorce run through our community like sand through your fingers. Many of our numbers are forced to become sex workers in order to bring in some form of income. The lack of family support and public assistance is appalling. Our community is often unable to access standard healthcare due to discrimination by providers, as well as an unwillingness of insurance companies to cover almost all transgender related health care. And since employment opportunities for our community is so limited, most cannot pay for hormones, counseling, and gender reassignment procedures. Life in the Transgender Community is dangerous and filled with hopelessness.

The statistics are staggering:

- Currently only thirteen states, the District of Columbia and 80 cities and counties across the country have passed explicitly transgender-inclusive anti-discrimination laws. These laws currently cover only one-third of the US population. In the very liberal ‘Blue’ State of New York, it is *legal* to refuse employment, housing and public access to Trans people.
- National statistics are just as sobering. It’s estimated that transgender men and women are 16 times more likely to be murdered than the average person in the United States.
- At the time of a San Francisco Human Rights Commission study, the Transgender Community faced a 70 percent unemployment rate, when compared with a 4 percent unemployment rate in the general population.

You may ask , “So why aren’t more Transgender activists fighting for their rights?” The answer is quite simple. The rules are different for us. We do not have the strength in numbers that other minorities have. It is estimated that transgender people represent only 1-2% of the world population. We are a small group of people that struggles with the issue of who we are.

Money is power, and we do not have the financial resources that other groups may have available. If we are out, we have limited employment opportunities due to discrimination and harassment. And if we are closeted, we may be employed, but we cannot openly *advocate*. If exposed we could lose our job and even our profession. In the end, transgendered people must face the fact that society thinks of us as having no value. We are literally a disposable people. So where does this all lead to?

My talk today is a plea for help. You have shown that this congregation indeed believes in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. You have shown, time and again, that this congregation will affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. My belief is that once you understand what the Transgender Community faces, you will become an ally in our fight for basic human rights.

In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.
Martin Luther King

So how can you help in the battle for Transgender Equality?

1. You must accept that being transgendered is not a sickness, it is not a curse, and it is not a birth defect. It is simply another diversity that is found in our world, like being left-handed, or having red hair. Since knowledge is powerful, please feel free to respectfully ask trans people about their experiences. The answers you receive may open your mind to possibilities you never knew existed.
2. Understand that there is much work to be done to change society’s understanding of gender and gender expression. That work will include re-evaluating everything from textbooks and popular culture to restrooms and medicine. It will require us all to take a hard look at the notion that only two genders exist in the world and that all of us - trans and non-trans - have been somehow limited by this idea in our lifetimes.

3. As more and more Transgender men and women come out, show them the dignity and respect they deserve. And take it from me, a hug always helps.
4. Politically, there are many ways to help. Sending a check to a Transgender Rights group and writing your State Assembly person, State Senator, U.S. Senators and Representatives are very important steps. I have created a contact information sheet that is available in the back for your convenience.
5. Finally, if you see or experience anything that affects the dignity and rights of Transgender people, speak out, act up!

Finally:

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.

Martin Luther King

TDOR INTRO

The Transgender Day of Remembrance was set aside to memorialize those who were killed due to anti-transgender hatred or prejudice. The annual event is held in November to honor Rita Hester, a trans woman who was murdered on the night of November 28, 1998. Hester’s murder, which remains unsolved, caused a San Francisco candlelight vigil in 1999 and became the seed to start the Transgender day of Remembrance.

This event serves several purposes. It raises public awareness of hate crimes against the Transgender Community, and it publicly mourns and honors the lives of people who otherwise might be forgotten. Throughout this memorial, we express our love and respect for our transgendered brothers and sisters in the face of world wide hatred and indifference. The Day of Remembrance also reminds non-transgender people that we are their neighbors, friends, parents, children, and lovers. The service gives our allies an opportunity to step forward with us and stand in vigil, while remembering our need for their help.

Each year the Transgender Community and its Allies stop to remember and honor those people who have been murder by hatred based violence. Not every person murdered is transgendered. Many times the violence is directed at someone with a perceived gender variance.

Today’s service will include a reading of the names of the 29 people. On a solemn day like today, I think of the victims we are here to remember and how their lives were snuffed out by acts of brutality. We must keep in mind that it’s not the number of people who were murdered this past year, it’s also the manner in which these victims met their end. In almost every case there is what is called Overkill.

Overkill is defined as an extreme amount of violence and brutality used against a victim that involves a destructive capacity greatly exceeding that required for a given target. In other words, I kill you, and then I continue to destroy your body because of my anger and rage.

As we will hear, the victims’ deaths were senseless, brutal, and savage. Unfortunately, the response from police and other government agencies were usually half-hearted and incomplete. These murders simply removed another piece of refuse from their streets.