

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Expanding Gender Identity”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 17, 2013

Reading

How important is gender to our identity? If we had the magical ability to cross gender lines and live in a different gender identity we might get that answer. We might then discover that gender identity is far less malleable than we might imagine. The [extraordinary case](#) of David Reimer illustrates the point.

In 1965, when he was circumcised shortly after birth, the attending urologist accidentally burned off his entire penis. In reaction, his horrified parents consulted Dr. John Money at Johns Hopkins University. The most famous sexologist of his time, Money, influenced, I'm guessing, by behaviorist theories of cognitive development, was convinced that human sexuality could be completely controlled through social indoctrination. He therefore instructed the parents to change the infant's name to Brenda (the name they'd planned to give the child if it were born female), have him undergo surgery to provide him with a vagina, and raise him as though he were their daughter. Taking their son/daughter to Money's office annually for gender-identity therapy as well as furnishing him with dolls and dresses, and giving him hormone treatments so that he'd develop breasts, they were assured by the psychologist that their feminized son would “function” just fine as a female.

So what was the result of such unprecedented sex reassignment therapy? In a word, disastrous. “Brenda,” as early as age three, was tearing off her dresses, opting to play with cars and guns (vs. dolls), and using her jump rope not for skipping but for whipping her identical twin, rough and tumble brother and tying people up. An outcast at school for her various behavioral oddities, she was routinely teased and rejected.

When Brenda hit puberty, despite all of Money's attempted “therapeutic” reprogramming, she/he experienced no attraction whatsoever to boys. Which led Money to ask the distraught parents: “How do you feel about your daughter being a lesbian?”

Finally, no longer willing to ignore their child's mental and emotional anguish, they confessed to their beleaguered adolescent, now 14, that “she” had been born a “he.” This came as a great relief to the child, who proceeded to change his name back to David. Undergoing a mastectomy to remove his breasts and a phalloplasty to give him a (nonfunctional) penis, he began dating girls and eventually got married. Still, as a

result of all the “psychological warfare” (his own term) that he just couldn’t get out of his head, at age 38 he committed suicide

“Evolution of the Self: On the Paradoxes of Personality”
by Dr. Leon F. Seltzer (Psychology Today, May 25, 2012, edited)

Gender identity matters a great deal, though it may not be obvious to those of us who are cisgender, those whose gender matches perfectly the sex the doctor pronounced at birth. Today let us open our hearts to those who are not cisgender. Let us honor their struggle in a gender-binary culture that only recognizes male and female gender identities that matches birth sexual assignment.

Sermon

Listen to [these glimpses](#) of the inner lives of transgender people:

I’m afraid that no one will ever be able to see me the way that I want, unless I take hormones. My face and body are too feminine to be seen as androgynous when I dress in masculine clothes, and I end up feeling disappointed about how I look and how people perceive me. So, I spend time meeting other’s expectations. I “play female,” and do it well. No one knows that I don’t recognize myself in the mirror. But if I transition, I’m afraid that my target audience, and my partner, will no longer find me sexually attractive. So I use what I have been handed, and pretend. I wish I were as courageous as so many others.

Just recently I grew breasts on hormones, but I hate when people notice them, because I feel like it gives them license to put the burden of gender on me. I prefer it when they don’t know which burden to put on me, so they simply label me ‘weird’ and move on.

Gender expression has never been an issue for me. However, I went to school the other day wearing conventionally feminine clothing, and the reactions I got were unsettling. “So you’re a girl again?” “I thought you were... what do you call it? Genderqueer?” “Why do you want to tell people you’re not a girl when you dress like that?” Never has anyone made me so upset about my gender expression.

As a female and largely female-presenting androgyne, I’m constantly torn between fighting to have my masculine traits recognized and not overdoing it to the point people stop recognizing my feminine traits. I don’t want to have to do that. I am completely comfortable with my gender expression – it’s people’s perceptions which make me uncomfortable in my skin. Source: <http://genderfork.com/category/your-voice/>

I am so moved by these voices. These people are thinking outside the box of I’m a man or I’m a woman. They are celebrating fluid gender expression in a culture that resists it. They are asking the question, “What is male?” “What is female?” “Are there other possibilities?”

If this is getting a little too freaky for you already, let me bring you back to earth with some definitions so we can stay on the same page.

Human bodies, most of the time, are born with clearly identifiable male and female sexual organs. But not always. Sometimes it isn't visually clear. Sometimes parts are missing, or are bigger or smaller than "normal." And sometimes, when it is visually clear, the chromosomes don't match. Sometimes what appears to be a girl has a Y chromosome. Sometimes what appears to be a boy has two X chromosomes.

And what a doctor can't see when pronouncing the sex of a child is the sense of gender in the baby's brain. Researchers are discovering that changes in the mother's hormones during pregnancy may influence the baby's gender identity. What we *do* know, as Dr. John Money arrogantly resisted discovering, is that as early as three years old, toddlers know their gender. And sometimes it doesn't match what they see or don't see between their legs.

Parents notice gender variance in their children when they don't behave the way western society expects boys and girls to behave and dress. While this variance is permissible for little tomboys, thanks to the feminist movement, little boys are another matter. This past summer, the New York Times Magazine had a great [article](#) about boys who like to wear dresses. I'd like to read the first two paragraphs of that article because it captures so well the moment we live in today as parents strive to be sensitive rather than repressive toward their gender variant children:

The night before Susan and Rob allowed their son to go to preschool in a dress, they sent an e-mail to parents of his classmates. Alex, they wrote, "has been gender-fluid for as long as we can remember, and at the moment he is equally passionate about and identified with soccer players and princesses, superheroes and ballerinas (not to mention lava and unicorns, dinosaurs and glitter rainbows)." They explained that Alex had recently become inconsolable about his parents' ban on wearing dresses beyond dress-up time. After consulting their pediatrician, a psychologist and parents of other gender-nonconforming children, they concluded that "the important thing was to teach him not to be ashamed of who he feels he is." Thus, the purple-pink-and-yellow-striped dress he would be wearing that next morning. For good measure, their e-mail included a link to information on gender-variant children.

When Alex was 4, he pronounced himself "a boy and a girl," but in the two years since, he has been fairly clear that he is simply a boy who sometimes likes to dress and play in conventionally feminine ways. Some days at home he wears dresses, paints his fingernails and plays with dolls; other days, he roughhouses, rams his toys together or pretends to be Spider-Man. Even his movements ricochet between parodies of gender: on days he puts on a dress, he is graceful, almost dancierlike, and his sentences rise in pitch at the end. On days he opts for only "boy" wear, he heads off with a little swagger. Of course, had Alex been a girl who sometimes dressed or played in boyish

ways, no e-mail to parents would have been necessary; no one would raise an eyebrow at a girl who likes throwing a football or wearing a Spider-Man T-shirt.

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/magazine/whats-so-bad-about-a-boy-who-wants-to-wear-a-dress.html>

Society strongly resists boys being both “a boy and a girl.” When Alex gets to middle school, gender conformity will hit him like a ton of bricks. That's the moment when secondary sex traits emerge and sexual desire starts cooking adolescent brains. Expressing or responding to that attraction is terrifying enough, but gender fluidity and ambiguity adds another level of anxiety in a society that stigmatizes same gender attraction. The strong pressure to pick a gender and conform does fit with the developmental stage of individuation and differentiation from parents. It doesn't fit the same way for those who are gender variant.

Gender variance also creates great stress for the child's parents. Some children are born extremely clear, just as David was, that their gender does not match their sex. Today, gender confirmation treatment and surgery can bring great relief and peace to such children. Making those changes before puberty starts can greatly assist the child's ability to live in the gender identity that they know they are. Secondary sex characteristics so dramatically shape human bodies that changing them after puberty reduces the ability of the individual to “pass” as that gender.

Many children entering puberty, some as early as 10 or 11 for girls, are *not* extremely clear. And how, parents ask, can we expect a child to have this figured out as such a young age? Since they are too young to make this decision autonomously, their parents are the final arbiters. How do parents make such a huge, life altering decision, that potentially eliminates the ability of a girl someday to carry a child or the ability of a boy to father one? Yet, *not* to act greatly increases the risk of future mental health problems and even a much higher risk of suicide.

One way to make that decision is by avoiding it. Doctors can give children hormone blocking drugs that delay puberty until they are ready to make the final decision for themselves. But that delay has its own consequences as the child's development falls behind the development of their peers. And who knows what the long term side effects of these drugs will be on fertility and health.

Given the width of gender variance, there aren't any easy answers I can offer this morning. There is, however, a lot we can do as individuals and as a congregation to make a positive difference through aspiring to be transgender allies. We can work together to create a safe place here in our congregation for those who identify as gender variant and gender queer. We can work together to advocate for transgender rights such as the gender expression non-discrimination act being considered by the state legislature and supported by Interfaith Impact.

I spoke this week with AJ Place, who is transitioning from female to male. He does transgender training for students at Union College. AJ grew up in our congregation, the child of Bobbi Place. AJ didn't have words for his gender dysphoria until high school in the 1980's. I asked AJ about what we could do as individuals that could help. He suggested three things we can do today that will make a major positive difference.

The first problem cisgender people have dealing with transgender folks is pronouns. Our language enforces gender binary thinking by not having pronouns for people who are gender variant. Some people are trying to introduce new pronouns like "ze" rather than he or she and "zir" instead of "his or her." We may be using those terms in ten years but they haven't gotten much traction yet.

The best solution when you meet someone and have a sense of uncertainty about which pronoun to use is to ask which they prefer. Transgender people would much rather be asked than to have you guess the wrong one. Asking takes the stress out of the situation and respects the other person's gender identity. As one genderqueer person reports: "It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside when someone actually asks me what pronouns I prefer instead of just assuming."

The second big issue that comes up again and again for transgender folk is bathrooms. Which one do you use? For the most part this isn't a big deal in men's rooms. Men are pretty standoffish, hardly looking at each other and rarely engaging in conversation. Still, someone with a large pair of breasts and a skirt using the men's room would likely draw some attention. Women's rooms tend to be more the issue. In our patriarchal society, women's rooms are traditionally refuges from men, a place of safety away from unwanted male attention.

Every time a transgender person must relieve themselves, they face an uncomfortable choice, fearing what might happen, who might not accept them, maybe humiliate them or even harm them.

So the most generous thing we can do in the restroom is assume that people have chosen the right one, based on their gender identification rather than on how skillfully they pass. Being friendly and welcoming in the restroom is gratefully appreciated. Some places are even going so far as making restrooms gender neutral. Another solution is to make bathrooms single use which removes the problem all together.

The final request is very personal. It deals with the medical details of the transition process. I don't know if it is curiosity or prurient interest, but cisgender people frequently ask for the details of the gender transition process. They feel free to ask if the transgender person has had top or bottom surgery.

If you aspire to be a transgender ally, don't ask. If they want to talk about it, they will volunteer the information. Otherwise it is none of your business. If they are presenting male,

accept it. If they are presenting female, accept it. If they are presenting in an ambiguous way, ask how they would like to be treated. And if they say “as queer, as neither male nor female,” try on for size responding to that person as neither male nor female, and be open to exploring what that might be like. Feel free to ask for help.

I have a lot more to say about this subject, but my time is short. I'd like to close with some words from Helen Boyd's book, *She's Not the Man I Married: My Life with a Transgender Husband*. In this third book on her cross-dressing husband, she expresses how public their lives have become by talking about their experiences. She also reflects on the thousands of transgender people and their loved ones she has met and shared their joys, struggles and sorrows. She writes:

Gender is experienced differently by different people, and as much as I still don't know what feeling "like a woman" or "like a man" means, I do know that many transgender people live much happier and much more fulfilled lives post-transition. The same goes for those whose paths are marked by cross-dressing, or living dually gendered lives, or genderqueer ones. Neither transition nor gender expression means life becomes easy, or even manageable, but it can become more honest and fulfilling, which is just enough of a respite for people who experience their gender discomfort in acute and chronic ways otherwise. P. 15 *She's Not the Man I Married: My Life with a with a Transgender Husband* by Helen Boyd

Let us open ourselves to honest, non-judgmental communication in the service of assisting people on their path to greater fulfillment. We may not be able to fix other people's gender issues. We can, however, strive not to make it worse and, maybe with a little love and care, make it a little better.

I close with one more genderqueer voice:

I went out yesterday, full dude garb, and got checked out by, like, three chics. First time I felt really and honestly. . .comfortable, you know? I wasn't worried about acting like a girl and making sure I was feminine. I wore what I wanted, picked the shoes I wanted, and didn't care who looked at me funny. Felt. Awesome.

Source: <http://genderfork.com/category/your-voice/>

May we be part of helping transgender people feel awesome about themselves.