

Celebrating the T in LGBTQ: One Family's Sacred Journey

By Joan Wiley

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[Joan's Bio](#)

Thank you all for giving us such a warm welcome today. It is a great privilege to be here.

In 1998, your congregation was certified by the Unitarian Universalist Association as a Welcoming Congregation after having completed a voluntary program. At that time, you voted to affirm that you welcome and celebrate the presence and participation of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons. Since then, the program has been updated to include material on trans-identified persons.

Starting in February, a workshop will be held each month following a Sunday service. This will give you an opportunity to learn about issues faced by trans-identified persons, and more about our gay, lesbian and bisexual members and communities. The ultimate goal is for you to be recertified as a Welcoming Congregation by the Canadian Unitarian Council. If you are interested in this program, please contact Art Brewer or Brenda Ponio or see upcoming issues of Horizons or orders of service.

It is in this spirit of recertification as a Welcoming Congregation that I come to you today, not as a doctor, or a social worker, or a professor, or any other type of professional. I come to you as a mother who was invited by my child to join a remarkable journey of self-discovery. This journey started with words that you may have spoken or heard yourselves: "Mom, I have something to tell you."

My husband and I have two amazing children. Our daughter is 20 years old and in her third year of university in this city. Our oldest child recently celebrated his 23rd birthday; for the first 18 years, we loved this child as a daughter, and for the last five years we have cherished this same child as our son. He is transgender.

Trying to understand sexual orientation is one thing, but many people, if not most, have a much more difficult time wrapping their heads around the definition of gender. One of the simplest definitions of sex and gender I've ever read is: "Gender is what is between your ears, sex is what is between your legs."

Sex is the biological physical body, its reproductive organs, its secondary sex characteristics. Prevailing societal beliefs say humans are divided into a sexual binary, male and female, as defined by doctors at birth. Chromosomally, sex is determined as XX for women, XY for men.

Gender is the *social* binary construct of masculinity and femininity.

Just as society unquestioningly believes there are two bodies, male and female, it also believes there are two genders, man and woman. If you inhabit a male body, you are a man. If you inhabit a female body, you are a woman. And somehow gender identity, a person's intrinsic sense of self or soul, of manhood or womanhood, is supposed to somehow magically take up residence in the appropriate body each and every time.

Gender defines how we dress (pink versus blue), how we behave (submissive versus aggressive), what jobs are appropriate and how much we will be paid, or how to express ourselves (emotionally or with stoicism). And because it is a social construct, gender demands shift with the times.

Transgender is the T in that alphabet soup combination of letters LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two-spirited, queer and questioning — and is often used as the umbrella term for those people who are gender variant. But we mustn't assume that all trans persons want to be identified as being in the vanguard of smashing gender definitions, or wish to identify as men or women. Many trans persons identify as both, as neither, or as someone altogether different.

Gender identity has absolutely nothing to do with erotic and sexual attraction. A trans person can be gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, asexual — in other words, anywhere on the spectrum of human affection and desire.

Trans people are often assumed to be suffering from mental illness, personality disorders or psychosis. The medical term for a trans person is one who experiences a gender identity disorder or gender dysphoria.

And as with minority sexual orientation, the percentage of the trans population is in dispute, and I've read estimates ranging from a ratio of one in 39,000 individuals, which I think is low, up to three per cent of the general population.

Transitioning is the period whereby trans persons begin changing their appearance and bodies to match their internal identity. Because these changes are so visible, they must literally "out" themselves to everyone; co-workers, families and friends. While in transition, they are highly vulnerable to discrimination and marginalization.

Our trans children share *some* of the same challenges as gays and lesbians, and also experience issues that are *completely different*:

- Risky and expensive sex reassignment surgery;
- Hormone treatments that are often accompanied by nasty side effects;
- Prying, intimate questions that would be considered shockingly rude if asked of anyone else;
- Endless red-tape procedures to obtain legal name changes;
- Very real personal safety issues;
- Inadequate funding and availability of social services;

- Delisting of provincial medical services;
- And of course, rampant rejection by family and friends.

Hershel Russell, a trans activist in Toronto, cites a U.S. study in which 24 young trans people were interviewed. Twenty-three of the 24 faced verbal and physical harassment, 18 dropped out of school, and 17 were sexually assaulted or raped. And because most trans youth cannot bear up under the tremendous bullying they experience, as a rule they are under-schooled and therefore under-employed.

As well, Russell notes, many homeless shelters are gender-based or inappropriate for trans people.

Given all of that, it is not surprising that the greatest heartbreaking statistic is this: one-third to one-half of all trans persons have attempted suicide, and many have completed taking their own lives.

Transgender persons have a long way to go before they enjoy full equality, although there have been baby steps taken in some areas. On Oct. 31, 2002, the Northwest Territories became the first jurisdiction in Canada to explicitly prohibit discrimination against transgender people.

But there have also been regressive steps. In 1998, Ontario de-listed sex reassignment surgery from OHIP. The current health minister has said that Ontario is not considering joining the provinces that pay for sex changes.

Besides the prohibitive costs, sex reassignment surgery is not something that all trans persons want. It is time consuming because multiple procedures are required, and SRS often achieves less-than-satisfactory results.

Consider now some of the privileges we have as non-trans people:

- Strangers don't assume they can ask us what our genitals look like or how we have sex.
- Strangers do not ask what our "real name", or birth name, is and then disregard our chosen name.
- We don't worry whether we will be able to find a bathroom to use or whether we will be safe while changing in a locker room.
- We are not considered "mentally ill" because of the way we identify;
- Our medical problems are not always related back to our gender ("Oh, you have an eye infection; it must be because of the hormones you're taking.")
- Emergency trips to the hospital are not fraught with anxiety or even put off because of our gender.
- On a related medical note: A young trans man, whom I've come to love and deeply respect as a friend, describes how difficult it is to present as a male and request an annual gynecological exam to make sure all of his female parts are in good working order.

- We aren't questioned or have our medals stripped when we win a sporting event. A trans competitive downhill cyclist from Canada says: "I have found as a trans person it's acceptable to compete, but don't you dare win." The media don't consistently portray us something less than human or trot out stereotypes.
- We do not have "family values" lobbyists mounting campaigns to keep us from doing the jobs that we love.
- Finally, we do not have to run the risk of being physically or emotionally abused every time our gender identity becomes known.

Despite these hardships, many of our children succeed to live their truth. And this is why, when I am standing with a trans person, I know I am in the presence of astounding courage.

The experience with our son pushed the launch button that started me on a personal journey as a more active friend of the Pride community. In December 2004, I knew my life as a better friend had begun in earnest when I volunteered to sit on the organizing committee of Pride Network of Niagara and "came out" as a straight woman in a gay bar. This led eventually to the formation of TransParent Canada, a support network for the parents and friends of trans children of all generations.

Instead of searching for the meaning of life, my path is now taking me on a life of meaning, and this has led me straight, no pun intended, to the Pride community as a friend and ally. As a result, my life has been enriched immeasurably and I have gained much more than I have given.

Our son's exit from *his* closet changed nothing. And it changed everything. Our love for this child was undiminished, but our memories were ambushed.

In those initial confusing months, I peered long and hard at the gazillion photos and family portraits, looking for early "clues" to our son's new (to us) identity and scoured our local library for copies of "Trans-parenting for Dummies." The images swimming around in our heads of a blonde, blue-eyed girl and memories of our obstetrician's first words — "Congratulations, you have a girl!" — were very confusing given our new reality.

For a long time after the revelation, I was yanked between elation and grief. One day I'd be yelling from the mountaintop "Yes! Now this all makes sense!"; the next day I'd be sobbing over the "death" of my daughter. I was also deeply and profoundly grateful for our son's young friends who loved and supported him when he thought we would not.

In those early days, our son was the only trans person we knew, nor did we know any other parents walking this walk. It was extremely isolating and lonely. We dreaded telling others, and their potential reactions. And as loving and supportive as they are, even members of the local chapter of PFLAG Canada (Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays) were the first to admit they couldn't fully identify with our situation or answer our very specific questions.

Supportive parents, I've discovered, are rarely visible. It has become apparent to me that when trans folks emerge from the closet, their parents often enter into it. There may be many reasons why they go into this dark place:

- Denial, shame, or bewilderment that the child they thought they knew is a stranger;
- An overwhelming sense of loss, grief or guilt;
- Cultural or religious considerations and biases;
- And perhaps most of all, an unfamiliarity with trans issues. After all, the only exposure many parents have had with trans people is from less-than-supportive daytime talk shows.

I also believe many parents want to support their trans children, but are so overwhelmed by the issue that they are paralyzed. That was certainly true in the early stages in our case. Little things like pronouns became huge hurdles – he, him, she, her — and I was forever beating myself up for getting them wrong. But our son was very patient. After all, he said, he'd had a long time to get used to them because he had trans-identified for a very long time.

During my journey, guilt and shame were added to the emotional mix when I concluded that I was the only one who seemed to need support. Where were the support groups? Where were the other parents? I concluded I was weak and that those other parents were better and stronger than I could ever be.

So, as a family, we gained our strength from neighbours and friends who were overwhelmingly supportive when told of our new family dynamics. I'll never forget the mid-December day I left the house clutching a stack of letters, destined to be dropped off at nearby homes, to invite our neighbours to join in celebrating our son. The words I whispered to myself as I walked up to each home — “Spirit of Life, come unto me, Spirit of Life, come unto me” — gave me great comfort and steeled me for the task ahead. It became my Unitarian mantra, borrowed from one of my favourite Unitarian hymns.

We also gained strength from our Unitarian Congregation in Niagara. We have a smaller membership, and so we are able to address the congregation with joys and concerns. When we told our church friends our news, we received a standing ovation. Our congregation, while not officially a Welcoming Congregation, is considered by Niagara's LGBTQ community to be strongly supportive. For example, later this month it will host the second monthly trans drop-in event for trans people and their families and allies.

I informed friends and neighbours who called to support us that I was experiencing the same feelings I'd had when I was pregnant with my son — anticipation, wonder, excitement, lots of anxiety, curiosity. I even had stretch marks, but this time they were all in my headspace as I broadened and deepened my understanding of what it meant to be fully human.

As to be expected, not everyone was supportive. We had a bitter taste of rejection when one entire side of our family, inflamed by religious zeal, split away. Our son was labelled an abomination and my husband and I were called unfit parents. We were disinvited to the family Christmas gathering. That was in 2004 and the estrangement continues to this day. Our children learned the hard way that proclamations of unconditional love are not always what they seem. The children's story that was read today during the service was about real unconditional love, and so appropriate for today's message.

It would seem, even among family members, there is so much fixation with what is going on below the belt that they fail to remember the human heart that beats in the chest. I often say that our son is still the same gift to the world he has always been, just wrapped up in a different ribbon.

(And just to annoy the social, political and religious conservatives who would force our son back into a closet, I inform them that our child, in a very real sense, has been “born again”.)

It was during this very difficult time of experiencing first-hand the loathing of uninformed and misinformed people that my angry inner mama bear roared to the surface and the idea of forming a support group for the parents of trans children first wriggled its way into my brain. Could the reason I hadn't met other parents of trans children be because they, too, felt the same shame and embarrassment that our relatives did? Were they as uninformed about trans issues as I was? Were they captive in their own closets because they had no one to turn to?

But I'm ashamed to say that the idea of a support group waned: after all, despite the rejection of a large number of relatives, our immediate family had triumphed. Our daughter had instantly opened her heart to her brother. Our son continued to thrive. Our marriage had survived. Let others deal with their own problems.

And that's when I met the thief of my heart at the 2005 Toronto Pride Parade.

I was marching with members of PFLAG. This was the first time I had participated in or even attended this riotous, binary-busting celebration of sexual and gender diversity. We members of PFLAG were easy to spot with our sensible footwear, sunhats and protective clothing, quite a contrast to many of the parade onlookers and participants, especially the spirited delegates from TNT (Totally Naked Toronto) dangling their participles a few units behind us.

This thief, a young man, grinned when he saw my hand-lettered sign — it said "I Love My Trans Son" — and he started jabbing his finger into his chest, indicating that he too, was someone's trans son. I broke ranks with PFLAG and waded into the crowd, sign and all, to give this stranger a hug.

We embraced for a very long time, and then he whispered: "I wish my mom had been as understanding as you."

The aching sadness and despair in his voice was undeniable, and my heart broke. By the end of the parade, I had made up my mind: it was time to form TransParent, to coax parents out of their closets so that they may celebrate their children's journeys to authenticity. Not a day goes by when I don't think of that young man.

I absolutely do not want to leave the impression that this journey has been all about hardships. Quite the opposite is true. This has been a sacred odyssey and there have been many moments of pure joy, poetry, beauty, and yes, even humour. We have watched our son grow in confidence and make exciting plans for his future. My husband and I agree we are better people for

travelling this road. I have felt myself open up to a world of new possibilities and I have discovered the hill I'm prepared to die on.

Best of all, we see our son as our son, not as our trans son or former daughter. He becomes trans to me only when I deliver presentations like this one.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once noted that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He was absolutely right. Those of us who enjoy rights and privileges, some of them fresh and hard won, must never sit back while others are denied justice, equality and basic human dignity. It is simply not OK to pull up the ladder while others are still struggling to scale the wall.

And when we sing the words "O Canada, glorious and free", we should remember that while all of us are glorious, even fabulous, many of us are far from free. Some of us are in closets, chained by fear, marginalization, bullies, bigotry and beatings. We must ensure that all of us are free to love whom we choose to love, free to be authentic, free to be fully human.

Recently I had the pleasure of hearing social activist June Callwood speak at a convocation ceremony. She referred to the Second World War boxcars that transported millions of people to their deaths, and she observed that while the Nazi's "Final Solution" was evil, those people who complacently watched those boxcars pass by were just as evil in their own right.

It is in this vein that I ask two favours of all of you. The next time someone makes an inappropriate or offensive remark to someone in the Pride community, or to anyone else, or is physically or emotionally abusive, derail the boxcar. Put your Unitarian principles into action and challenge that person, even if your voice trembles. Remember that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and that we strive for justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

My second favour is this: I want you to look into your hearts today and think how you will respond, as parents or grandparents or friends or Unitarians, if some day a child comes to you and says: "There's something I need to tell you."

Joan's bio

Joan is a professional writer, editor and recovering journalist who already enjoys a connection to this congregation: in March 2003, she and her daughter helped to build homes for the campesinos of central Honduras as part of a World Accord construction crew.

Joan is the founder of TransParent Canada, a peer support network (associated with PFLAG) for the parents and friends of trans children. An essay she wrote about the influence of the 2005 Toronto Pride Parade on the formation of TransParent Canada was published in the *Globe and Mail* in August 2006 and received interest from parents in this province and from as far away as Yellowknife, Calgary, Vancouver, Nova Scotia, Idaho and Ireland.

She was a founding director of OUTniagara, the umbrella group for the sexual- and gender-diverse community of Niagara and a founding volunteer on Pride Network of Niagara. She is a current member of the St. Catharines chapter of PFLAG; a board member and workshop facilitator on the Positive Space Campaign Committee at Brock University, and until recently, part of the reorganization committee of Transgender Niagara. She has also helped to organize monthly drop-in evenings for the transgender community.

Joan has been invited several times to lecture to university students about diversity issues, and she organizes winter and summer solstice services for the Pride community and broader community. She is also the editor of OUTniagara's quarterly newsletter, *The OUTbox*. In June 2006, Joan was left speechless (in itself a newsworthy event) when she received the award for Outstanding Individual Contribution to the Niagara Pride Community.

In the past, Joan served on the board of the YWCA; was a member and chair of the environmental Green Committee of St. Catharines; and was director of the Social Justice Committee of the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara.

Joan lives with her compassionate, loving and patient husband, John, in Niagara. She is the very proud mother of two adult children who are making their own remarkable contributions to the world, and she is the household servant to the family dog.