

“Living Out Loud”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Whenever she imagined her child, grown up without interference from a judgmental world, she imagined its male and female halves as complementing each other, and as being secretly, almost magically powerful.” - Kathleen Winter, *Annabel*

Reading

Our reading is actually a reflection, written by Mallory, a youth at a congregation in New England.

Her minister asked her and others who had attended the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky last June to write a short reflection to share with the congregation the following Sunday from their pulpit.

They were to talk about what impacted them most.

This is what Mallory wrote.

She has given me permission to share it with you.

My experiences at GA were truly amazing. When we got there and we roamed around the building where it was going to be held, I thought to myself, “Oh no, this is going to be horrible.” Well, I proved myself completely and utterly wrong. The whole time that I was enrolled in covenant camp for middle-schoolers or younger, my parents had to sit in a chair in meetings. In the beginning, I wasn’t sure which one was worse, though in group exercises we got to know each other, and it was good.

For me, walking into a women’s bathroom has always made me hesitate. In most cases I just try to wait until I’m in an environment where I’m most comfortable. But, sometimes, that’s not an option. My walking into the bathroom literally makes heads turn. All the women do a double-take. Most think (thankfully in their heads), “What is that boy doing in here? Oh wait, hold

on a second. That must be a girl.” But it always takes them a moment to realize. Some just glare at me questioningly, some say it verbally, some just leave me alone.

The majority of the time I have to go to the bathroom and my mother is with me, I will tell her and just walk in with her. Now, I’ve asked her to do this so many times. I used to have her stand outside the stall, but now I just need her to walk in with me. Mom says that when we walk into the bathroom she mentally dares women to say something. If she said it out loud, this is what I think she would say: “Say something! I dare you! Question if she belongs here or if she got the wrong room! Say it!” Anyway, that’s just her “mother bear” coming out.

Now the thing I loved most about GA, besides meeting a new friend there.... My favorite thing about GA was gender-neutral bathrooms. Gender-neutral bathrooms are made to accommodate both sexes without anyone judging whether or not you belong there. And inside those gender-neutral bathrooms were signs that said something like this:

“A person who is in a gender-neutral bathroom, and can’t be easily identifiable as male or female or LBGTQ (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and queer), knows where they are most comfortable. Please just allow them to make their own decisions as to where that may be, and don’t question whether they belong there.”

That was, by far, my favorite part of GA.

Sermon: “Living Out Loud”

It’s a decision many of us make without the least bit of thought.

We look for the strange but almost universal stick-figures—
you know the ones with the perfectly round heads,
the impossibly rigid arms and legs,
and, for the women, or so we’ve been taught,
an amazing A-frame dress that flares out
in a way I’ve never actually seen in real life.

We look for these odd ambassadors of washrooms everywhere,
and we choose accordingly.

Male. Female. Either. Or.

But, of course the choice isn't that simple,
not always, and not for everyone.

We humans are more complex, more splendidly complicated
than this either/or choice might suggest.

For some of us, it's both/and, or none-of-the-above.

And so, at the threshold of most every washroom
we encounter,
is a confrontation with our understanding of gender.

Most of us live in the privileged place of not even noticing.
We push open the door, glide over the threshold
and never give it a second thought.

That is, until we hear from someone like Mallory,
who reminds us that so much of the built world around us
hasn't been designed with an understanding, let alone an appreciation,
for the full range of human experience.

For the past couple of years, most of the major UU gatherings I've attended,
including GA in Louisville, have replaced the standard signs for female and
male washrooms with signage that signals these same washrooms
have now been designated as gender-neutral
for the duration of our conference.

There is often a note of explanation, prominently displayed,
much like the one that Mallory described.

This significant shift from business-as-usual
is always highlighted at the beginning of the conference
so that people are well-informed.

Single stall washrooms are provided elsewhere
in the conference centre for those who prefer them.

And what then typically ensues in the coming days

is a fascinating and sometimes awkward exploration of the inadequate categories we humans too readily, and often unthinkingly, cast ourselves and each other into.

Invariably, even among people who've read the signs on the doors, people who are in full support of creating this safe space for everyone, regardless of where they find themselves on the gender spectrum, there is a moment or two, not at all unlike what Mallory described as being her typical, daily experience.

Moments of barely disguised hostility.

Moments when we might wonder, "What are you doing in here?"

Moments when our assumptions about another's gender identity are confronted and even our own gender identity is challenged.

Such was the moment I shared with a colleague last year in New York, at a conference on gender identity and sexual orientation at the United Nations.

There was a moment, even with all that we knew of identity and choice and dignity, that she and I caught the confusion on each other's face at having found one another in the same washroom.

Our confusion quickly gave way to a knowing smile, and the mutual recognition that we were being asked to grow in our understanding of what it means to be human, and in what it means to honour the diversity that dwells amongst us, as well as the diversity that already *is* us.

Now, if you're thinking that this conversation doesn't have anything to do with you, I'd invite you to reconsider.

We have tended to see human difference in Western culture through a set of clear-cut, binary, either/or choices.

Female/Male. Feminine/Masculine. Woman/Man.

While every culture comes up with a general view of what each of those terms means, the categories easily fall apart if held too tightly.

You only have to look around to see that we are all somewhere on a spectrum between—and sometimes even beyond—these categories.

Think, for a moment, about sexual orientation.
Generally, of course, this is how we think about who people are attracted to sexually and romantically.

We know that humans are not easily defined as being either straight or gay.
We know that there are many points in-between.

There's the famous Kinsey Scale, with gradations from 0 to 6,
with 0 being exclusively heterosexual, and 6 being, well, as gay as it gets.

Beyond this scale are people who are asexual;
people who live happily without feeling sexual attraction to anyone.

So, where would you place yourself?

Are you attracted primarily to women or to men, or both, or neither?

And to take that question from a slightly different direction,
are you attracted to what's called masculinity or femininity, or both?

It's possible to be attracted to a feminine man, or a masculine woman.

So, if we were to array ourselves across the sanctuary with 0 on that end and 6
on this end, where would you fall?

And, if you look across the years of your life,
have you be in one place, or have you moved around a bit?
Or have you moved around a lot?

Take a moment to digest all of that.

[Pause]

Now, let's apply some of that thinking to what's called gender expression.

Gender expression is generally understood
to be how we present our gender in an external way.

In how we live our gender on the outside.

It involves our clothes, our mannerisms, and our voice.

It also includes the pronouns we choose to use.

And, here's a quick tip:

it's always polite to ask people about their pronouns, "Tell me about your pronouns..."

In doing so, you'll learn

there's a world far beyond she, her, hers and he, him, his.

So, I invite you to now think about where you fall in the spectrum between what we traditionally define as masculine or feminine.

Where do you find your external self?

Are you toward one end or the other?

Or do you dwell somewhere in the middle and present as agender?

Do you move around the spectrum frequently,

or have you moved significantly at some key points in your life?

Take another moment to digest...

[Pause]

Now, let's look at what's called gender identity.

This is how we think of our gender internally.

It is our innermost sense of being a woman or a man,

being both or neither,

or falling anywhere along the spectrum.

Our gender identity doesn't always line up

with the gender we were designated at birth.

Too often, we get tripped up in thinking of gender as what might be called biological sex.

But there's so much more to it than that.

Many people considered a boy at birth, know themselves to be a woman, or vice versa, or some variation in-between.

To me, what's most important about gender identity is the absolute authority that each of us has to speak of our own experience.

Let me repeat that: To me, what's most important about gender identity is the absolute authority that each of us has to speak of our own experience.

You might have heard that a couple of months ago, Facebook expanded the options for defining your gender identity on your profile.

There are now 56 identities to choose from.

I can't recite them all here,
but, on the general spectrum of woman-ness and man-ness,
I invite you to consider where you find yourself?

Do you consider yourself to be a woman, a man, both, or neither?

Or do you prefer the term genderqueer or something else to signal that these categories don't work for you?

Take another moment to digest.

[Pause]

Now, I invite you to think about
how each of these spectrums lines up for you.

Sexual orientation – who you're attracted to.
Gender expression – how you externally convey your gender.
And gender identity – how you internally understand your gender.

I'll use myself as an example.

I'm gay. A Kinsey six.

In terms of gender expression,

I present toward the more masculine end of the spectrum, though there's certainly still a lot of room between how I define masculinity and, say, how Russell Crowe or Sidney Crosby does.

My preferred pronouns are: he, him, and his.

As for my gender identity, I know myself to be a man, though I do recognize within me attributes that are sometimes thought of as female. It's hard to explain, but it feels that it has something to do with intuition and knowing.

Finally, I'd say, for me, each of these categories has been pretty much the same throughout my life.

So, think about yourself. And after you've had a moment to think about yourself, I encourage you to think of someone in your life who you recognize doesn't exactly conform to one or more of the standard categories.

How do they line up in terms of sexual orientation, outward gender expression, and, their internal gender identity?

Now, you may be wondering why I've asked you such arguably personal questions this morning.

It is because I want you to behold the wonder that you are. And because I hope you might see the wonder in those around you.

We are beautiful, complicated creatures.

The first principle of Unitarianism reminds us that each of us is of inherent worth and dignity.

And the third principle of our faith calls us to "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth."

That's what this is really all about.

As my colleague Rob Hardies puts it¹:

“Spiritual growth isn’t about a vertical ascent to heaven
but about growth in every dimension at once.
It’s spirituality in 3-D.

Growth in spirit doesn’t measure one’s proximity to a God above,
but rather the spaciousness of one’s own soul—
its volume, its capacity, its size.

“We need souls,” he says, “that can take in the world
in all its complexity and diversity, yet still maintain our integrity.

And we need souls that can love
and be in relationship with all of this complexity.

Instead of flight or flight, we need a spiritual posture of embrace.”

The history of our movement
has been about ever seeking to widen that embrace.

Four centuries ago, our Puritan forebears were obsessed with who was getting
into heaven and who was going to be left out.

Over time, that concern shifted, with the help of the Universalist side of our
family, to see, that if heaven is real, maybe everybody gets in.

Eventually they redefined “everybody” from only other Christian souls
to an embrace of everyone—of *all souls* upon this good green earth.

That significant theological turn has pushed our tradition
to widen our embrace for generations, now:
to celebrate and revere the role of women in this world,
and to honour the special place of children in our midst.

It has stirred us to work to abolish slavery,

¹ Rev. Rob Hardies, from *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, ed. Ellen Brandenburg.

to champion the rights of those with mental illness,
to visit the prisoner, feed the poor, and house the destitute.

It has caused us to march for civil rights, to take in Vietnam war resisters,
and raise money to fight injustice around the world.

It has led us to labour for the full rights
of lesbian and gay people in this country.

It is moving us to honour and protect the aboriginal people of this land and
make right centuries of wrong.

And it is calling us now to embrace people
who blessedly don't conform to the gender stereotypes we all live under.

But let me be clear.

May this be a mutually enriching embrace.

May the full inclusion of transgender people in our lives
and our congregation be seen for the gift that it is.

One of our most cherished religious values is freedom.

The trans people I know are paving a path to freedom
from the categories that bind us.

And they're inviting us all to follow—
to break open the concepts of identity that we live and labour under
and consider a fuller and more truthful understanding
of ourselves and each other.

This month, as we consider what it means to live an honest life,
let us summon the courage for a frank conversation about identity.

Let us tend to the spaciousness of our souls.

Let us take up the quest to be our truest selves,
and find the strength of will to live our lives out loud.

So may it be. Amen.