

“Radically Welcoming?”

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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.

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 there, at the threshold of most every washroom
we encounter in our corner of the world,
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 last few years, most of the major UU gatherings I've attended 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 and 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 a couple of years ago 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 comfort,
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,
and many expressions of bisexuality in-between.

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, to both, or to 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 been 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.

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.

In doing so, you'll learn
there's a world far beyond she, her, hers and he, him, his.

Gender expression is also about how we "read" the gender
of other people based on the outward cues they're offering up.

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

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,
of 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 person has
to speak of their own experience,
to determine how to define themselves in all of these categories.

That reality is now reflected on Facebook
which has 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.

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 how other men might.

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, think of someone in your life who 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.

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

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 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, 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.

I have revisited this sermon,
which I preached a version of two years ago,
because gender identity has become
a much more prevalent conversation in our society since then.

It seems there is a rapidly growing awareness among many of us
that gender is more complex and more dynamic than we ever realized.

This reality is reflected in current legislation before Parliament.

Bill C-16 would amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code to
provide protections on the basis of gender identity and expression.

That this debate is happening in the House of Commons makes me very proud—
especially in light of the horrific, so-called “Bathroom Bills”
that have been debated, and in some cases passed, in so many U.S. states.

While there have been similar efforts in Canada,
I am proud that we are moving toward respect and inclusion,
and away from fear and ignorance.

Here at First, we are updating the signage for our washrooms
to make clear that gender diversity is fully welcome here.

This matters on a deeply personal level to many people in our congregation—
more than you may realize.

And so the washrooms downstairs will remain designated male and female,
but with an intentional clarification that people are welcome to use
the washroom that best matches their gender identity and expression,
the washroom where they feel comfortable, and safe.

The private upstairs washrooms will also get new signage
to reflect there are more choices than simply male or female.

In this way, we are following up on the recommendations made to the Board and to the congregation last year by our own Diversity Working Group.

My hope is that this step on our part will give substance to our statements of inclusivity.

Frankly, we are only slightly ahead of what will become the law of the land after Bill C-16 passes Parliament.

But as our country changes and grapples with the challenges around gender diversity, my hope is that we, in this congregation, will lead the way in helping the whole of our society to understand and honour the glorious mix that makes up humanity.

May it be so. Starting here, today.

Amen.