

“Dismantling the Gender Binary”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Jan. 12, 2020

Avery Jackson was the first transgender person to be featured on the cover of a National Geographic magazine. 10 year old Avery poses, lounging on a cozy chair, pink t-shirt, pink leggings, pink and purple hair. Avery spent her early childhood as a boy before transitioning to an openly transgender girl. The magazine asks the child, “What’s the best thing about being a girl?” Avery replies, “The best thing about being a girl is, now I don’t have to pretend to be a boy anymore.”

As an intern minister in Minnesota, I put together a year-long initiative on gender, focusing on transgender issues and also what it means to be gender non-binary. Gender non-binary was an emerging concept to me – I knew all about male and female, the gender binary, but ministry introduced me to this reality of what it means to be gender non-binary; neither male nor female, or both, or one sometime and the other another. And so I researched and educated myself, and the congregation and I pursued a yearlong journey examining gender. This is important work, so that folks like Avery can live as their true selves.

Each one of us grapples with the idea of finding our own place in this world: where we fit, how we identify, who we relate to, what our niche is. And yet how complex does this search become if we are struggling with finding and formulating our own identity? Each one of us must wrestle with self-discovery, and this becomes more complex when foundational pieces of our identity are in flux. Gender is a basic component of self to anyone; gender is central to who we are. And, as a society, we have constructed rigid ideas about what gender is – male and female

– and what it means to embody those two genders. What happens when we move beyond that gender binary; that binary that is entirely socially constructed? What happens when we allow for more than two genders, or allow individual's genders to change? There are folks who know their body does not align with their identity, some who can be public about this and some who can't. Folks of any gender: you are true, you are whole, and you are beautiful.

Gender is a fundamental piece of identity for everyone. It is basic to understanding ourselves; to finding our place in the world. Who am I? There are many ways to define and understand gender. Let us pause and take a moment and explore what gender really is:

There are many ways to look at gender. The one I find helpful looks at three different pieces of self: body, identity, and expression. Body is how society genders our bodies – the sex assigned at birth – male or female. Identity is our internal experience and what we name ourselves, traditionally man or woman. Expression is how we present our gender to the world: clothing or appearance, traditionally masculine or feminine. Body, identity, expression. Three things that each one of us claims, some with more adversity than others. These three things, created and reinforced by the culture we live in.

Typically, gender, this combination of, body/identity/expression is presented in a binary: female/woman/ feminine or male/man/masculine. But these are by no means the only way to express gender identities. There are no rules or guidelines we have to follow. There are innumerable options to express any of these three things, in any combination. We may experience ourselves as male and express ourselves with dresses and glitter. We may have a

female body but identify as having no gender at all. No matter how you express these three things: you are true, correct, and whole.

I have my own experience with gender. I was born with a female body, I always identified as a woman, and I express myself in a feminine way: dresses, heels, makeup. This was and is my truth – my gender – whole, correct, and beautiful. Gender is a basic component of who we are. Let us love all of the options we are provided with; let us love each and every person's truth.

To really delve deep there are terms we need to understand: Cis gender, trans gender, and gender non-binary. Cis gender refers to folks whose gender identity aligns with their sex – the gender they were assigned at birth. Born male, identify as a man.

Trans gender means the gender you identify with is opposite of sex; opposite of what was assigned at birth. Born male, identify as a woman.

Gender non-binary are genders that folks identify with that are neither male nor female.

Perhaps both, perhaps neither, perhaps the identity changes and is fluid.

Any gender, cis gender, trans gender, or gender non-binary, isn't this a beautiful expression of self? And this is a truth- any gender is a person's truth. Any gender need be accepted as a truth. Each and every person knows their own truth – even if the truth changes. Any gender is correct, whole, and beautiful. Any understanding or representation of self is correct, whole, and beautiful. Any gender is welcome here. And what does this welcome mean?

Rev. Victoria Safford writes,

“I will not speak of “tolerance,” with its courteous clenched teeth and bitter resignation. I will not speak about “acceptance,” of “other” people and some “other” kind of “lifestyle.” I can only look in laughing wonder at human life in all its incarnations. I can taste only in passing the breath of the spirit of life on my mouth and understand our common longing to breathe in deep, deep gulps of it. I cannot think of being anybody else’s “ally,” even, because even that implies some degree of separation—some degree of safety for some of us, not all. We are “allied” with no one and with nothing but love—the larger Love transcending all our understanding, within which all the different, differing, gorgeously various, variant, beautifully deviant aspects of ourselves are bound in elegant unity.”

Gender is a beautiful way of expressing human life! Filled with laughing, joyous wonder. Not necessarily male or female, but any gender identity, whether the identity you have had since childbirth or one that has changed- whether this identity changed once or many times.

Incarnations of human life. Let us ask of ourselves to love ourselves, to love others, this larger love transcending our understanding, no matter what gender we identify with; no matter any identity we may hold – race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ethnicity. Let us take a moment to honor love, not acceptance or tolerance. Not an us vs them; ally versus other, but a love of all folks of all identities. Folks who are gender diverse, what is needed is both acceptance of self, and an acceptance of their faith. Let us be that embracing, welcoming faith.

In this space, all identities are honored and loved. Honor this common longing to breathe the spirit of life.

Poet Mark Nepo writes, “Regardless of the culture we are born into, it isn’t long after we arrive that everyone starts pointing and telling us where we need to be and what we need to do to get there” in our culture, there is a gender binary: male and female. This is what society tells us from the very beginning. Pictures in children’s books display little girls in dresses playing with dolls; boys in overalls pushing toy trucks through the dirt; women on television are portrayed as nurses or teachers while male characters more typically serve as surgeons or pilots. Colors: pink and blue; clothing: suits and dresses. We have gendered names, gendered activities, gendered sports, gendered foods. This is how folks interact with pop culture in this society. I again reflect, any gender expression is true, complete, whole, and beautiful.

There are so many things society tells us to be: attractive, successful, smart; with integrity we name our own identities and ways to live life and act in alignment with our values and 7 Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Those gender roles, we can tear them apart, switch from one to the other or do both or do neither. Any combination, Whatever gender you identify with is true, correct, whole, and beautiful. Any combination is holy.

Gender isn’t static; gender isn’t concrete. Gender changes across culture. where we have two genders, others have three or more. We have norms: flowing hair for women, short cuts for men. We see women as passive and men as dominant. These things change and evolve with time. Let us embrace this identity of trans folks, or folks that are gender non-binary; where there aren’t two genders and there is no need to identify with the gender you were born with. No matter what your gender identity, you are whole, complete, true, and beautiful.

Nepo continues, “Being who we are is the necessary adventure. It unlocks everything, not because our self is so important but because our essential nature that our self carries is the immediate doorway to everything that is life sustaining.”

“Being who we are is the necessary adventure.” As we navigate the rugged terrain of understanding self, as we work to find our place in this world, let us claim our genders, whatever they may be! Let us be who we are. This is true for anyone in this room – being who we are is the necessary adventure

I spoke earlier about my own adventure: female/woman/feminine. My adventure is binary, and brings with it certain privileges. I am what is expected, I don’t have to worry about how my gender presentation will be received. I don’t have to worry about what bathroom to use; or if I will be chastised or harmed for using a specific bathroom. I am simply accepted. There are binary assumptions, and identifying with these assumptions leads to privilege.

Part of the gender initiative I put together as an intern focused on pronouns. We are all familiar with the binary pronouns – she and he. But what about folks who don’t fall on the binary? How can we express pronouns if we identify as neither or both or any combination thereof? Many folks identify with “they” pronouns, “they” used as a singular pronoun. This does not assume any gender. Instead of “he went to the grocery store,” “they went to the grocery store.”

Instead of “I like to talk to her,” “I like to talk to them.” At my internship site we had those three pronouns on buttons; folks could pick she, he, or they and pin these multicolored buttons on their chest, clearly displaying their pronouns. I brought this idea to a group of elementary school children. I gave them each a note card and asked them to make their own pronoun

button. It was amazing! These kids were so creative with the pronouns that felt just right to them. They wore them proudly around the church.

To use a wrong pronoun is to not acknowledge a person's identity, to misgender a person, to invalidate their truth. Make sure to know a person's pronouns, to ask for pronouns, and to use pronouns.

Anyone who is not cisgender has had to wrestle with some serious questions or fear. I thank the various trans persons who shared these truths with me, and who have given me permission to share them with you. This knowledge that "my body is wrong" or "this is wrong and I don't know why" or "I don't feel comfortable." No one need feel this way – let us all travel this necessary adventure until we find a gender expression that aligns with our individual truth. This may require transitioning – physical things to change the appearance of a body – physical things that allow people to live their truth. Trans folks may choose medical procedures to change their bodies to be in alignment with their truth, and others may choose not to have medical procedures. This requires "coming out," letting those around you know what you do not identify with whatever label had been placed at birth. This phase of "coming out," often again and again and again, can be extremely difficult. Folks can feel dysphoria, a severe discomfort with ones body or name or pronouns or presentation. Folks face balancing acts of what may be physically dangerous and what is mentally dangerous. Anyone facing these struggles, you are whole, true, and beautiful.

Reverend Dr. David Breeden writes, in his poem, "Yes, There's No Binary,"

The road not taken
is not a fork. That's
too simple a thought,
flipping some coin.

Either/or. Nope. It's
not this or that.

No or yes. It's nor/

neither and all
of the above and
more. The road
taken goes every

way at once. There.

There. They. Them.

Go. Now. Live.

It is not a binary: it is not male and female, either/or. It is far more complex than this. Not the two options of flipping a coin, but many whole and beautiful options. No gender, multiple genders, boy, girl, neither, both. Boy at one point, girl at another. Cis gender, trans gender, gender non-binary. All are beautiful, all are true, and all are whole.

Go. Now. Live.

May it be so, and Amen.