

"Visible and Vulnerable"

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My sister, Julie, is a skilled seamstress. One year in the early 1980s she gifted me, for Christmas, a blouse she'd sewed for me. I appreciated both the workmanship and the thought that went into that shirt. The color was an earthy off-white color that suited my tastes, and it was made of a nice, soft, flowing fabric. It had these big, flouncy ruffles around the neck and down the front. If I remember correctly, it was trimmed with big lace.

I could not wear that thing.

I felt bad about it, because I admired that blouse in the abstract, and because Julie had put time and energy into it, and I could see *why* she *thought* I would like it. I could see where it would look nice on someone else. I could even see where someone else might think it looked all right on me. But I wouldn't have felt like myself wearing it. I would have felt inauthentic, like I was posing as someone I wasn't, or walking around in someone else's skin.

While I lived halfway across the country from all my family, at the time, my younger sister, Shelley, lived near our older sister. Apparently having seen the garment either while or after Julie was sewing it, Shelley mentioned to me, over the phone, how beautiful this blouse was. I *truly* wished I could give it to her, because she would have happily worn it; but I felt that would be a huge faux pas. So, it sat in my closet until I finally donated it somewhere.

Fast forward to a decade, or so, later. I was on a D.C. Metro train with a female friend. I was wearing a loose fitting tie dye dress. My friend remarked on what I was wearing saying, "When I dress like that, I feel like I lose power."

What I heard when she said that was, "I think clothing like that makes you lose power." Although I didn't think it was conscious, I felt it was a kind of a take-down. Looking back at it now, however, I think I should have taken it more at face value. I don't think it was about me. I think she meant exactly what she said: When *I* dress like that, *I feel* like *I* lose power. When *I* dressed like that— in loose, flowing, tie-dyed clothing—, *I* felt like I gained freedom. Big ruffles and lace on me are another story. That says nothing about someone else wearing them.

Are there ways that you're just not comfortable presenting yourself that would be fine and dandy for someone else? If so, I ask you to keep that in mind as we reflect on visibility and vulnerability.

This coming Friday, March 31st, is International Transgender Day of Visibility. In this connection, I'd like to hold up the experience of people who defy society's expectations around gender, and to highlight their contributions in loosening the constraints imposed on us all by assumptions around gender. For purposes of this sermon I'll be focussing more on gender non-conformance than on transgender experience, specifically.

My son, Basil, recently gave me two books by writer, activist, and performance artist Alok Vaid-Menon. Alok (who uses singular "they" pronouns), identifies as gender nonconforming, gender fluid, queer, trans, transfeminine, and non-binary. If this sounds complicated, let it be known that, seeing the author identified, on the internet, by so many different terms, I felt confused and had to look Alok up on the Nonbinary wiki.

I don't know whether it needs to be said, but I'll pause here to say it in case it does: All transgender people don't necessarily feel more authentically themselves by appearing in the guise society expects of someone of the sex they were not born into. In other words, Alok's identity as transfeminine doesn't mean they desire to take on the appearance of what we're enculturated to think a woman looks like. Alok has not chosen to medically transition, and generally doesn't remove their body hair.

One of Alok's books is a collection of poetry titled *Femme in Public*. I'd like to read an abridgement of one of the poems from this collection. The full poem has nine verses of varying lengths. I'll read just four of the verses. (I'll also be editing one word for profanity.) As I read, I ask you to do two things: To keep in mind how the wrong clothing can make me, or you, feel like an imposter; and to notice how you feel as I read from the poem.

street tax*

* ...

1)

today a man on the street pointed to me & said
"what the hell is that!?"

I wanted to turn around,

tell him that i got this dress on sale
& I got this body for free
but you have been making me pay for them ever since.

2)

when cis women
tell me to shave “if i want to look like a real woman”

i remember that men are so lazy
they make women do the work of patriarchy
for them

i smile back
say: “no thank you!”
by which i mean,
what could be more real than this?

...

6)

to the four trans women who pointed and laughed at me,
shouting:
“what the [bleep] do you think you’re doing?”
is this what we are fighting for,
to be on the other side of the joke?

i wonder:
when they see us
see ourselves like this,
who gets the last laugh?

7)

scene: you on the 2 train downtown, reading a book,
strategy: looking down means you don’t have to watch
them watch you

rationale: they will forget you, you will never forget them.

cue child: "why are his nails painted? boys aren't supposed to do that!"

6 more stops.

lose place in book.

cue mom: "boys can do whatever they want!"

strategy: pretend not to notice.

5 stops.

cue child screaming:

"mommy, it's not right. boys don't do that!"

4 stops.

cue train amused. cue train smiling.

child: "look, everyone look!"

cue nervous smile.

strategy: laughing at yourself makes them more comfortable with you.

strategy: laughing at yourself makes you more comfortable with you.

rationale: why would anyone want to look like you?

3 stops.

cue mom: "you better be quiet or that man is going to attack us!"

2 stops.

cue conspicuous body.

cue adams apple.

(i mean cue original sin.)

cue frenzied breath.

cue palpitating heart.

cue churning stomach.

1 stop.

cue too-big hands.

cue too-big shoulders.

cue too-big gall.

how dare he leave the house?

how dare he take the train?

how dare he be?

or rather:

how dare he she?

how dare! heshe!

strategy: do nothing.

rationale: your beauty is their beast.

your victim is their villain.

walk out.

do not

look back!

i repeat:

do not. look. back!

-Vaid-Manon, Alok. "street tax." *Femme in Public*, 2nd ed., c2021 (p. 4)

What does it mean to be visible? When you're visible, you're putting yourself out there, allowing yourself to be vulnerable. In a piece titled, "Perhaps life would be easier if I shaved, but why?" on the BBC News website, Alok writes:

When you're gender nonconforming, you're never safe from bullying. There are no spaces where I can truly feel at peace....

There is a crucial distinction for trans people between being made visible and choosing to be visible. Visibility is the reason we experience violence online and public. The truth is, every single day I get hateful messages from trolls on my social media.

It's terrifying to receive such abuse. Studies have found that trans people have extremely high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder from constant harassment.

It has made me extremely anxious and I constantly feel threatened. It means that even when I'm alone or among friends, I still have traces of stress. Anxiety can be painful - it has had an impact on my body, manifesting as chronic pain and joint pain.

-23 May 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48149985>)

[End of quotation.]

Imagine the level of wrongness you'd have to feel in a more conforming guise to choose this level of vulnerability over a less conspicuous appearance.

This month we're exploring "vulnerability" as a spiritual path crucial in helping us to— in words from the SoulMatters Sharing Circle website— "birth a new normal worthy of our hopes." (<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/themes.html>) I feel that one shining feature of a new normal worthy of our hopes must be that everyone's worth and dignity are recognized when their outsides reflect their insides. And I think a critical element of co-creating this new normal is embracing those who make themselves vulnerable as trail blazers on this path.

This may— and, in fact, probably will- involve paying attention to any sense of disconnect we personally experience when we're met with someone whose authentic self-expression rubs up against some of our most firmly ingrained notions of "what goes together." I'm sure we're all agreed on the principle of each person's inherent worth and dignity, and that no one should be treated cruelly for how they look. Those beliefs don't necessarily make us immune to any squeamish feelings of dissonance that might arise when deeply rooted conventions are visually challenged. But doing our part in birthing a world where people are not bullied and harassed for being who they are requires us, first, to sit honestly with what arises when our expectations are upended. Only after processing those feelings can we question their basis, and move from "I would never hurt someone" to "How can I help?"

That's the feeling piece: The part where the oyster senses a little irritant, something that feels foreign; and, rather than ejecting that bit, it forms something beautiful— inside itself!

Another step in birthing this new and more just normal is to engage intellectually, asking: Why? Why do people feel it's okay to abuse someone for visibly aligning their outer expression with their inner self in gender nonconforming ways?

Let's look at a few reasons. One is a sense that some people's feelings don't matter, or don't matter so much. This is simple "othering," and doesn't actually make much sense. Since there are as many ways of being human as there are humans, no one can be "other" than most everyone else.

Another excuse for punishing those who don't conform to expectations around gender expression is the notion that the gender binary is "how things have always been." A reasonable length sermon doesn't allow for an in-depth treatment of gender in history and prehistory. But the late sociologist Allan G. Johnson sums it up in his book, *The Gender Knot*, writing:

Given thousands of years of patriarchal history, it's easy to slide into the belief that things have always been this way. Even thousands of years, however, are a far cry from what 'always' implies unless we ignore the more than 90 percent of humanity's time on Earth that preceded it.

-Johnson, Allan G., *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, c1997 (p. 232).

"This is the way things have always been" doesn't always make something better. To sharpen the light on this, let's focus on a shorter timeframe and consider some things that looked disturbingly wrong to, say, people of my grandparents' generation:

- Women and girls wearing pants in the workplace, school, or church
- Jeans worn by anyone in those same places
- Female doctors
- Female ministers
- Elvis' hip movements

Many of us here can conjure recollections of the for-real revulsion that such things once evoked. And let's not forget the Beatles' scandalously long hair— and I *am* referring to the length of their mop-tops in the *early* 60s. In an article on *JSTOR Daily* titled, "The High School Hair Wars of the 1960s," author Matthew Wills recounts:

The arguments against long-haired boys in high school had to do with tradition and the authority of the adults running schools. But there was also a strong strain of sex panic in the opponent side that sounds much

like our contemporary debate over transgender bathroom access: long hair meant you couldn't tell the boys from the girls; long-haired boys would sneak into the girls' room; and, ultimately, chaos would result from the blurred gender lines.

-March 10, 2018 (<https://daily.jstor.org/the-high-school-hair-wars-of-the-1960s/>)

Closely aligned with, and intertwined with, the "It's been this way since time immemorial" argument are assertions to the effect of "It isn't natural." This argument is supposedly based on biology. I'd like to return, here, to Allan G. Johnson, the sociologist I quoted earlier. I'll quote him here at some length:

Why cultures would include two categories, male and female, isn't hard to see, since no society can continue without reproducing its human population and it takes males and females to do it.... But it's one thing to make a clear distinction and quite another to give it cosmic importance, as if who people are as female or male were at the core of their lives, the linchpin of personal identity, and the rock foundation of society and social life....

From a strictly biological perspective, it's hard to see what all the fuss is about since what actually makes us male or female depends on a tiny bit of genetic information out of all the other factors, genetic and otherwise, that shape who we are....

[This doesn't mean] that reproduction doesn't matter. It does suggest, however, that the obsession with sex and gender isn't based on some vital interest in human reproduction. What this obsession *does* serve is the interests of patriarchy, which uses it to anchor the whole idea of a male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered society. After all, if we were human beings first and women or men second, the patriarchal order wouldn't make much sense. Patriarchy, not some inherent human condition, requires that gender assume mythic proportions and take its place as the most defining and confining human characteristic, one that dwarfs all others by comparison. This is true of most oppressive systems

-Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, p. 56-58

[End of quotation.]

This isn't about biology. It's about holding together an invisible structure. There's nothing natural or inherently right about our gender binary and approved gendered presentations. And we could all point to times in our history when atrocities have been

justified in the name of what's "natural" and, therefore, "pure" and what's "unnatural" and, therefore, "innately perverse."

One more excuse used for directing cruelty at gender nonconforming people's visibility is the "You can be who you want to be in private, but why do you have to put it in my face?" argument. In other words, "I'll tolerate your existence if you'll slink back into the closet." This line of reasoning stems from the sense that the observer's feelings matter above all else. And that's not true.

That's the intellectual piece: Asking, "Why?" and trying to understand it. We may be tempted to stop here. But we need to move on to actions, to ways of being in the world.

Like fish, we're all immersed in the water we're swimming in. If someone sticks a hand above the surface, and says, "Hey, there's something else out there!" do we say, "Nope. It's water all the way up"? If others gather 'round and guffaw and poke fun at how silly this swimmer looks with their arm sticking up, do we look the other way and swim by?

For change to happen, someone has to be on the front lines, daring visibility and exposure. The prevailing power of gender norms, and the pressure to conform to them, confine us all. Gender non-conforming people are taking the brunt of the impact of disrupting this web of assumptions. I think we do well to protect and uphold those who risk making themselves visible in this way, challenging assumptions because keeping their true selves invisible isn't tolerable.

But given the pervasiveness and invisibility of this medium we live in, how can we each make a difference regardless of our own comfort level with today's conventional gender expressions?

Possibilities abound, and my time here is limited— and "resistance" is *next* month's theme. But in *The Gender Knot*, Allan G. Johnson points out that part of a system's ability to perpetuate itself lies in offering participants paths of least resistance. People tend to follow these paths because they're familiar and predictable; because it's harder to traverse a path with *more* resistance; and because they don't see that other paths exist. (Johnson, p. 237-238)

One thing we can practice that's quite powerful, even though we won't always see the effect play out, is bringing alternative paths to light. This *might* be as simple as saying, "I don't see it that way," or, "Gee, I was just thinking how *nice* that dress looks on you."

The more *uncomfortable* we can make the well-trodden path, the less likely others are to take it.

Here's a place where we may get stuck on the treadmill of the intellectual piece. We may go straight from gaining some understanding, ourselves, to persuasion, telling people why they're wrong ... which might compel the oyster to violently eject the too-painful irritant. I don't think oysters can actually do that.... But trying to change people's minds is harder than softening hearts by offering a glimpse of another way of being, and mind-changing efforts are more likely to produce counter-resistance.

Instead, we can be like the foreign bit that's just enough to prod the mollusk to begin pearl formation. As we can form pearls within ourselves, we can be "pearl seeds" in society and situations, providing just enough disruption to things-as-usual, producing just enough of an itch that an adjustment is made to make things *feel* better. And, eventually, something beautiful emerges.

I think we can carry this pearl image forward in the coming months, as we walk the paths of Resistance in April to Creativity in May; and land, in June, on the path of Delight.

To close, I want to borrow a final time from the words of Allan G. Johnson: "If the main requirement for the perpetuation of evil is that good people do nothing, then the choice isn't between all or nothing, but between nothing and *something*." (p. 250, Johnson)

[Pause.]

In the face of unnecessary cruelty aimed at people for being visibly who they are, let's do *something*.

Amen.