

Beyond the Binary: A Journey of Gender and Faith

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There is a need for us, as humans, to categorize people and put them into an order that makes sense in our brains. This becomes a problem when words do not exist, or we do not know the words to describe what we see in different people. So, we do the best we can and put a label on them. That in itself becomes a huge problem for people that do not fit into those nice neat boxes. I am one of those people.

Most of us probably hear the term transgender and we think of someone who changes from male to female or female to male. A shift from one side of the gender binary to the other. The first time I heard someone call me transgender, my first reaction was that they were mistaken, but I realized that I probably needed to go back and figure out what the term meant now. It is now used as an umbrella term to include anyone who does not fit into the gender binary. I identify as a transmasculine person, but not as a trans man. To me this means that I have a need for my body to look more physically male, but still have an internal female identity as a strong part of who I am.

I was assigned female at birth and was raised and socialized female, though I fought some of that without even knowing it as a child just because it didn't make sense to me. I never understood the purpose of makeup, hair curlers, purses, fancy jewelry, shoes that didn't let you run, and I was also very annoyed that Ken's clothing did not fit Barbie. As a child, my favorite thing was to be running around in the woods or playing around the pond in the backyard fishing, catching frogs, turtles and generally getting myself covered in dirt and mud.

I was an equal when I played with the boys in the neighborhood, though I did always need to be on the "shirts" team if we played basketball. When the play group was all girls or I was with my Girl Scout troop, I was always the protector, the dad, the tough one (even though I wasn't), the one who didn't mind catching the occasional bat or mouse, cutting up the firewood, or walking around at night at camp without a flashlight so someone could borrow mine. Throughout my life, the one place where I could always truly be my full self was and is in Girl Scouting and there has never been a question if I belonged, even now when I might not look like I belong now.

As a child and early teen I would go to organized archery shoots with my father at various fish and game clubs. At registration, my father was always asked “How old is your son?” In response, he would just gently grab my ponytail or braid and hold it up above my ball cap. Then the guy at the registration table would quickly change the question to “how old is your daughter?”, clearly surprised, and apologized. Those moments made me feel sad and proud at the same time, because in those moments I was reminded that I was different. I was just being myself, but the societal expectations were definitely present. The message received was that boys were allowed, in the eyes of society, to do the things that I liked to do. They could wear the clothes that I wanted to wear. For me, that would have to change at some point for me as I got older.

I was raised in the congregational church in the 1980's. I loved singing in the youth choir and ringing handbells, but I also remember hating getting dressed for church on a Sunday morning. It was every piece of clothing that I hated, and I wanted to wear a suit like my father. I remember asking my mom when I was really little if she could just sew my dress up the middle to make it into pants- without the understanding that I would need to walk like a penguin for the day if that actually happened. The clothing and other adult expectations of what was proper led me to chafe even more

against the “believe this and be this” message that I heard.

In my Freshman year of high school, I very reluctantly started confirmation class. Though I can't say I remember much of the class 30 years later, what I do remember is waiting in line outside of the minister's office to talk with him about your plans for confirmation. I let everyone go in front of me because I knew I would be in there for a while. As I expected, and after what felt like a lengthy conversation and several questions from me he couldn't answer, I chose not to get confirmed.

Also, by my high school years, the Westboro Baptist Church had started to make national headlines protesting homosexuality with their “God Hates Fags” signs. I didn't know at the age of 14 that I was a lesbian and didn't even have the language for it, but I did see how people used god and religion to discriminate against others and how no “church people” that I knew spoke about how wrong it was. The lasting impression made on my teenage mind was that churches often said or taught one thing, but did another. Love your neighbor, well ok, maybe not those gay people. I struggled with the teachings of the church versus the actual actions of the church. As a young adult, I watched friends and other adults I had respected as a child, sign pledges to and within their churches opposing

same sex marriage in Massachusetts in 2003. The churches were now actively working against my equality, just in case I had any questions about that before!

On a positive note, growing up, my high school on Cape Cod was progressive in the sense that there was a GSA (gay straight alliance) that started in the early 1990's. We had gay and lesbian teachers, and even if they never talked about it at school, chances were you ran into one of them in real life outside of school and probably at the beach in the summer.

As a young child in Girl Scouts, you learn the words to the Girl Scout promise and talk about what promises really are. Over time, your understanding of the words of the promise evolves. Learning how to live into the Girl Scout Promise (and Law) is in itself a spiritual journey- with the promise to serve god, country, and to help others at all times. Girl scouting and involvement in other service activities were a big part of my college experience. In college, I joined Alpha Phi Omega, which is a co-educational service fraternity with roots in boy scouting, that unites members through leadership, friendship, and service. While there was no shared religious creed between brothers, the common bonds were the principles and values of scouting. Many of my brothers are the teachers,

pastors, and public servants of today.

My undergraduate studies in the late 90's and early 2000's took me to a small, Methodist college in central Pennsylvania. An area of the country where when you walk into some local stores you are greeted with a scripture passage on chalkboard, and there are churches with "Jesus saves" neon signs- except I found time and time again that their message really was "Jesus saves, but well maybe not you..."

On campus, we had a very small "diversity" library in the basement of the chapel. The problem with this setup was that you had to ask the college chaplain for the key to the room. This was set up, I suppose, to protect the students that wanted to access the material and to keep it from becoming a point of controversy by not putting it in the general library. That "just ask" system worked for some, but I never wanted to go talk to the chaplain about getting that key. I was scared and didn't want a lecture about God or anything else. The idea of going to a church to access "restricted" material just didn't seem right- and this was a time before you could just google information you were curious about. You also needed to sign the key in and out, so there was basically a public list, in a 3 ring binder, of people that had accessed the material. There was no Youtube or "it gets better project"

and Matthew Shepard had been murdered in the Fall of my freshman year of college. I came out as a lesbian when I was 21, in my Senior year of college. This of course was an issue as I started thinking about where in the country I could safely teach and remain employed. My world became smaller and over time, I learned to put my safety before my truth.

As for the library, I did get a little braver as I got older and accessed it a few times. Actually, it was in that space that I found a pamphlet about Unitarian Universalism with a rainbow chalice on the front of it. I read it and filed away the information in my brain, thinking that these folks might be ok, but still convinced that churches were relatively terrifying. Also, a few months before graduation, I met an alumni Alpha Phi Omega brother, much older than myself, on campus. He had been over at the local military base and was back visiting campus. We ended up walking around campus and chatting together about the concepts of service, vulnerability, god, and GLBT issues, for the better part of two hours. It was an unusually deep level of conversation with someone I had just met. But, he was my brother and we had both pledged ourselves to the same ideals. That needed to count for something. I didn't know it until later, but he was a pastoral pentecostal minister and one of very few "Full Bird" Chaplain Colonels in the US Army Chaplain's corps. A month or so after that conversation, I

received a letter from him. He addressed me as his brother, told me that he was being activated for a combat assignment, and among other things, to remember that God loved me, all of me. The agnostic in me chuckled about the last part, but I kept this letter and tucked it away.

After graduation, I moved to NH to start my career in teaching and my journey as an independent young adult. I was 22, quiet, scared, had no connection to NH, and knew absolutely nobody except for my college roommate that had agreed to move to NH for a few years. Finding a church wasn't on my radar screen (it was actually on my list of places to avoid) as I sought out a community that would embrace me as an adult and a full person. The local UU church had a very small rainbow flag on the sign in front of the church. I walked past the building one day- remembering the rainbow chalice pamphlet from the diversity library, and the letter from my fraternity brother, I decided it might be worth the risk to meet a few people. It could just be the "safest" place in town if nothing else. It was still a huge risk for me to step into the building.

I was hoping that this church would be a safe place for me to be myself. Maybe these people understood enough and wouldn't "out" me to my school district and put my employment on the line and I hoped that it was

far enough away from the kids and other teachers in my district. Yet, little did I know that a 30min drive to somewhere in NH is considered practically around the corner. A few weeks later, I met a church member who was actually a fellow teacher at the same school that I had just started at. I remember thinking “oh great, now what?” I was just getting comfortable with myself and now somebody had the power to possibly cause problems for me. Obviously I really didn't have a grasp of UU principles yet! That first year, she ended up being someone that I could talk to openly and that made a huge difference.

At 22, I was the only person in my age range at that church, but it gave me a place to exist in peace, find focus and provided some consistency as things changed in my life. It was a place set apart where I could push myself, wrestle with tough questions in the quiet of the sanctuary at any hour of the day or night, and find others that were willing to push boundaries. In my 20's I joined a fellow member as a facilitator for Concord Outright and had the privilege of working with some great young people as an OWL facilitator and as a coming of age mentor. Talk about stepping out of your comfort zone, when you are asked by the young person to be a coming of age mentor and you don't feel even remotely qualified for that role. There was some “forced growth” for both of us in that adventure and

boy was it an adventure. I remained with this UU congregation for over 20 years.

While there has always been far more support at school than I knew or trusted, there was no non-discrimination statement including the words “sexual orientation” or “gender expression” in my contract or in school district policy in 2003 that I knew of. As a young professional, I did what I needed to do or at least what I thought I needed to do. I censored my speech, wore the expected professional feminine clothing. skirts, blouses, nylons, dress shoes- everything I had always hated as a kid and now I was doing it to myself because it was the expectation. I didn’t feel I could be myself at work and I was relatively miserable. This luckily has improved and evolved over the years, but it still took me over 15 years to get to the point where I could wear a shirt and tie to school without it causing any reaction. I am thankful that things have changed because not existing as your authentic self, is stressful and unsustainable.

Before my hair became as short as it is now, I had it cut chin length so that I could donate the rest. I hated it, I couldn't even wear a baseball cap without lots of barretts, but decided that I needed to live with it for a while. I immediately started getting comments mostly from straight cis women

about how pretty my hair was. How much it complimented me and made me look so cute. It drove me crazy! That haircut had accidentally forced me further into a feminine presenting territory than I had ever been and that was not going to work for me. I am still amazed by how differently you are treated by others just by how you look. The story around who they think they see is different now, but the snap judgement and assigning to a box is just the same.

The 2017 school year came with a student that saw me as a 100% authentic person, though I knew I was hiding a lot. This student globbed onto me as they struggled with their gender identity. This experience also confirmed that I needed to make some changes for myself - to actually be an authentic person. I had had some big issues with my chest since I was in middle school and this just pushed me over the edge. I had known deep down for years that chest masculinization surgery- commonly known as top surgery would help to solve so many issues for me, but it would create its own issues that I wasn't yet ready to deal with.

Yet here we were, I had finally reached a point where I needed to learn more about surgery options, surgeons, and of course, medical insurance. In 2019, Insurance still required that I live one full year as my "new" gender

before they would allow any conversation of surgery. How does one live as their “new” gender when they have been doing that all along? Binary interpretations of change are fully present in the medical system, and I was required to start testosterone, which came with its own hesitation, excitement, and adjustments.

Around 2018-2019, there was a trans and questioning gender group meeting at the Manchester UU church, but it was not a group just for UU folks. The simple rituals of this group always involved celebrating all of ourselves, our joys, fears, and so many other things. Our circle always involved bubbles, because they were magical, fun, and sometimes made you laugh like a little kid! It was good to be with others as we navigated complex issues. This group gave me a true understanding that I wasn't alone in this struggle. After all of the appointments, consultations, and paperwork, I had my top surgery scheduled for early June of 2020.

This possibility of top surgery also came with a spiritual side quest, you know just to make the process that much easier and I spent a lot of time asking myself if this was an ok thing to do. I got hung up on the whole piece of “god made man in his own image”. If god made man in his own image, who was I to change my body? Is the body the image of god or

something deeper within? The list of questions got longer and longer every day and down the rabbit hole I went.

Top surgery and reading the Torah came next. Yes, it's an odd combination, but it happened. Before surgery, I had decided on some "light" reading, as I would have lots of time on my hands recovering alone that summer. Why I chose to do this, I'm not exactly sure, but the thought was to look at things again, get ready for new beginnings, and to revisit older, formative experiences in a new light. Anyway, I got myself a far better translation of the bible than I was given in my youth, because words and translations matter, and started reading and reflecting. That adventure continues on today.

Also, this reading brought up a need to go back and look at the clobber passages in the bible. The 6-8 passages that are often taken out of context, and have been used to justify hurting and excluding so many LGBT+ folks. I needed to understand the real context behind them. What was the lens of the people that wrote that scripture? Every story has a context, and the world and culture that the writers lived in is very different from our lives today.

In the Spring of 2023, I was asked by a long time Girl Scout friend and mentor to join her volunteering at Camp Aldersgate, a methodist camp and retreat center in RI for a week of arts camp. I was fully qualified, but after my experiences in college with the Methodist church and its negative stance LGBT+ folks, I was also very sceptical. I did however, have full confidence and trust in this person to not lead me into a space where I would be unwelcome. That July, I found a solid camp program, counseling staff, and board of directors that were actually trying to live the teaching of love, diversity, and service with no exceptions. At camp, personal pronouns, preferred names, and recognition of gender identity were just routine! The next spring, I was asked to join their board of directors and I accepted.

As for my daily life, public bathrooms can be an experience for me. I have had women, even before my top surgery, call security, tell me only women belong in this bathroom and that I should read the door, give me nasty looks or visibly pull their small children close to them when I walk by. Somehow, I am now a threat to these women. Women are often the ones that push me out of womens' spaces and into a space that might not be safe for me. Also, if I use the men's bathroom, I am the one who is breaking the rules or in some places the law.

It is true that in men's bathrooms there is less drama, the line moves a lot faster, and nobody decides to have a randomly personal conversation with you while they are asking you to pass them some toilet paper under the stall. I'll call that one small fact a win, but that does not deny the danger of bathroom bills that are being passed across this country. With an X gender marker on my state ID and passport, where is the restroom that I can use in public spaces without causing a disturbance or forcing me to break the law? How do I navigate the world, but remain true to my core identity?"

It's a blessing and a curse for me to fully pass as a cisgender man, at least in normal interactions and conversation. It's safer, but it forces me right back into the gender binary, just on the male side and that is exhausting unto itself.

Hormones put you into a modified puberty and things change. As a middle school teacher, I'm very familiar with puberty, especially when it's heard in the voices of 12-14 year old boys. I remember teaching a class and I was desperately trying to figure out what kiddo's voice was cracking a lot that day. Then after a few laughs to myself, I figured out that the kiddo was in fact me. I knew it would happen at some point, but totally didn't expect it

that day. It was time to take a deep breath and move forward through the changes, the questions, and the unknown.

Friends, we know that change is a constant in life and we can do nothing to stop it, no matter how hard we try.

Growth, on the other hand, is a conscious choice. Growth makes us step out of our comfortable places, feel and accept our vulnerability, and step into new experiences. So today, let's make a commitment to grow together in love and understanding.