

Delusions of Gender

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

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I decided to use the month of October to offer messages around the LGBTQ+ community. October is typically when a PRIDE festival would be happening in our local communities, but because of the pandemic there will only be a few virtual events. Our congregation is a Welcoming Congregation. We know that religious spaces haven't always been welcoming places for all people, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality. We are out to change that. For over 25 years we Unitarian Universalists have worked hard to make sure lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are full members of our faith communities. Being welcoming means striving for radical inclusion and creating spaces that honor every part of our identities, backgrounds, and experiences. In order for us to achieve this we must become competent in the work. Our competencies translate to spiritual maturity. That is, growing into our faith and tradition.

This morning we focus on gender. Let me tell you a story. It was 1973. I was in the dress-up corner of my kindergarten classroom. I eyed a black and shiny patten leather purse dangling on the edge of the clothes chest across the room. Little did I know that Betty Jane Pelkey, standing on the opposite side of the room, had her eye on the purse as well. We looked at each other and darted toward the purse, both grabbing it at the same time. We were in a tug of war pulling the purse back and forth, back and forth. Betty Jane finally lost her grip and I was victorious in securing the purse. Unfortunately, caught up in my victory I started thumping Betty Jane about the head and shoulders with the purse and was swiftly interrupted by Mrs. Hurley, our teacher. I lost the purse and sat in the hallway for twenty minutes. When I returned to the room, my friend and neighbor Clark told me it would be ok because purses were for girls anyway. I didn't believe him. I never told anyone, but I didn't think girl things were only for girls and boy things were for only for boys. I knew at that kindergarten age that it was wrong and it was best to be quiet.

What I've just described to you is a true story and I think it demonstrates what is wrong with how our society manages gender. It hasn't always been this way. When we consider archaeological evidence, it becomes apparent that our expectations of gender roles can be problematic. In ancient terms, our gender divides are far from universal. It is not the experience everywhere that gender falls neatly into binary categories of male or female; that is, into being either male or female, with nothing in between. In fact, the evidence suggests that much of what we perceive as core components of our identity were not significant categorizing factors in the past. Rather, we see ambiguities in identities repeatedly represented.

We are socialized to oversimplify all of this, and to think that once we know one thing about someone, we can fill in the rest of their blanks. For example, if we learn someone is a woman, we have a picture in our mind of what that person looks like and who she's attracted to. We might assume she expresses gender in feminine ways, was assigned female at birth and embodies female-ness, and is exclusively attracted to men. This image is simple, however, is not true or

complicated enough for many, if not most, of us. In clay figurines, for example. Clear gender categories are found in some material, but there are others which are difficult to define. From the Neolithic of the Middle East, the vast majority of human figurines don't portray either male or female features. Many figurines actually combine male and female characteristics into single figurines, or appear either male or female when viewed from different angles. Our categories of male and female just don't work when analyzing them. This is something which is now being recognized by archaeologists – our understanding is rigid by our own perspectives of gender categorization. So there are numerous examples of apparent gender equity, as well as examples of more ambiguous third gender representation. This raises issues for the historical basis of our understandings of gender, gender roles and identities.

With gender identity, people often think of social roles, gender norms, and personality traits, and the expectations baked into these things. In the top blank, we can write “Woman” and in the bottom blank we can write “Man”, and we're going to add a “-ness” to both of these, because these lines indicate all the varying degrees of potential “Woman-ness” and/or “Man-ness” with which someone might identify.

With gender expression, people often think of hair styles, grooming, make-up, clothing, nonverbal mannerisms, and other things we see on the outside. We'll write “Femininity” in the top line and “Masculinity” in the bottom line, as these are the two words that people generally use to describe the different ways our expressions show up.

And with anatomical sex, the first things that people think of are genitals and reproductive organs, but lots of things make up what we call sex, including body hair, hip to shoulder ratio, chromosomes, pitch of voice, and more. On the top line, we'll write “Female-ness,” and on the bottom line we'll write “Male-ness,” because here we are depicting the varying degrees someone might embody these traits, as opposed to the sex a person is assigned at birth (which is generally solely determined by external genitalia at birth).

There is growing recognition of the problematic nature of strictly binary gender categories, including the acceptance of third gender students in schools in India, or on changes in law in Germany to include a third gender category on birth certificates. We need to challenge what it is to be “like a girl” or “like a boy”, where these ideas came from and how they have thrived. If our gender categories and the identities they promote are problematic, then biases and inequality based on these differences become even more flawed. We need to talk about all these issues, and particularly interrogate the well worn narratives that are used to support these ideas.

Most people – including most transgender people – are either male or female. But some people don't neatly fit into the categories of “man” or “woman,” or “male” or “female.” For example, some people have a gender that blends elements of being a man or a woman, or a gender that is different than either male or female. Some people don't identify with any gender. Some people's gender changes over time. People whose gender is not male or female use many different terms to describe themselves, with non-binary being one of the most common. Other terms

include gender fluid, agender, bigender, and more. None of these terms mean exactly the same thing – but all speak to an experience of gender that is not simply male or female. It isn't as hard as you might think to be supportive and respectful of non-binary people, even if you have just started to learn about them. You don't have to understand what it means for someone to be non-binary to respect them. Some people haven't heard a lot about non-binary genders or have trouble understanding them, and that's okay. But identities that some people don't understand still deserve respect. If you read this month's newsletter there is a page that offers the definitions of different identities. It's there to help each of us in becoming more competent and respectful in our understanding.

Use the name a person asks you to use. This is one of the most critical aspects of being respectful of a non-binary person, as the name you may have been using may not reflect their gender identity. Don't ask someone what their old name was. Honor who they tell you who they are.

Try not to make any assumptions about people's gender. You can't tell if someone is non-binary simply by looking at them, just like how you can't tell if someone is transgender just by how they look.

If you're not sure what pronouns someone uses, ask. Different non-binary people may use different pronouns. Many non-binary people use "they" while others use "he" or "she," and still others use other pronouns. Asking whether someone should be referred to as "he," "she," "they," or another pronoun may feel awkward at first, but is one of the simplest and most important ways to show respect for someone's identity.

Advocate for non-binary friendly policies. It's important for non-binary people to be able to live, dress and have their gender respected at work, at school and in public spaces.

Understand that, for many non-binary people, figuring out which bathroom to use can be challenging. For many non-binary people, using either the women's or the men's room might feel unsafe, because others may verbally harass them or even physically attack them. Non-binary people should be supported by being able to use the restroom that they believe they will be safest in. This is why we have gender neutral bathrooms in our congregation.

Talk to non-binary people to learn more about who they are. There's no one way to be non-binary. The best way to understand what it's like to be non-binary is to talk with non-binary people and listen to their stories.

The Rev. Meg Barhouse tells us, "Why do we need to know what gender a baby is. Why do we need to know whether to say, "Oh what a handsome baby" or "what a beautiful baby" or say to the girls "I love your little shoes" or say to the boys "those shoes make you look like you could run fast"! It's such a deeply embedded part of our culture and many people are just born knowing they don't like trucks cuz they're a girl and they don't like paint cuz they're a boy. Can our hearts be big enough for all of us. Because we need all of us. And we need to be able to focus on what matters. Truth. Compassion. Community. Love."

I no longer fancy purses, but so what if I did. If we are to create the world we dream about then we need to practice not only identifying people as just men or women and stop trying to figure that out. Letting go of our delusions of gender. We should be identifying people as people. When people express to us who they are either by telling us or by presentation we should believe

them, honor their chosen identity and lose all that keeps us stuck. This is who we are in our Unitarian Universalist bones-inclusive, loving, welcoming, and accepting. People are being murdered because of being their true selves. We are called to respond and change that. Justice and compassion are our theology. Let us live it.

May it be so.