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Welcoming Transgender
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As a teen, I went to a shopping mall with some friends.

What comes next is disturbing.

A friend whispered to me that there was a “freak” in the store. He took me to show the person.

To me, it appeared to be a man dressed as a woman.

My friends were laughing at this person, out loud, with cat calls.

I was confused. I was curious about this person. I was afraid to make fun of them. I felt sorry for them, because of the humiliating treatment.

I also did not know what to make of him or her.

In my depths, I knew my friends’ behavior was wrong. But I didn’t say anything. I was afraid.

I have never forgotten this incident.

Years later, I realized that was my first encounter with a Transgender person.

I have a second story to share.

Denise is a student who came to see me earlier this year. I’m a Dean at Truman College.

My door has a prominent sign on it, that discrimination against Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Transgenders is wrong. It used to have a Gay rainbow flag and Human Rights equal sign sticker on it as well. Someone keeps tearing these down. Of the three Gay deans we have, I am the most publically gay one.

Because of this, a lot of BLGT students come to talk to me.

Denise came to see me because security kicked her out of the women's bathroom. She was very upset, very angry.

Many trans people are harassed in bathrooms.

When I met Denise, I made a huge mistake. An embarrassing one.

To me, Denise appeared to be a man with long hair. I referred to Denise as "he." I insulted her.

She set me straight right away. She told me that she lived her life as a woman and referred to herself with female pronouns.

Many Trans people are embarrassed in this way, by being called with the wrong name or pronoun.

I apologized to her.

She is now one of the leaders of the BGLT student club.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to mentor transgender youth, when I was an intern for the Night Ministry.

I got to know Robert or Crystal, who shifts between genders, depending on the situation. She is a woman and wants to be seen as a woman all the time, but often presents as a man, to avoid problems. Other Trans criticize her for this.

Her parents kicked her out when she told them that she was really a woman. They gave her \$40 and told her to have a good life. They never wanted to see her again. That was a decade ago.

She goes to church at the Center on Halsted. She greets me whenever she sees me. I think she views me as an ally.

At the Night Ministry, I also met Noemi, who told me how hard it is to be a Trans woman. She constantly experiences ridicule. People try to shame her, and call her names. They shun her. They stare away from her, as if she had some terrible disease. She is often called a “prostitute,” but in a derogatory way. She cannot find a job as woman. As a man, she has found work. When she went to work as a woman, she was fired. Illinois is one of the very few states that has a law against this. But discrimination still happens.

Trans people face rampant employment discrimination.

Week in and week out with Trans youth at the Night Ministry, I had to confront my own trans-phobia.

I had to face my own biases and prejudices about gender identity. I had to come to terms with my own fears and anxieties.

I knew the prejudices about Trans in society. And in the gay community. Even a week ago, one of the Chicago gay papers published an editorial against including Trans in the BGLT movement.

To educate myself, I read several articles and books on Trans issues. I watched movies about Trans. I attended a Trans allies workshop.

I never dared to ask Denise or Krystal or Noemi or the other Trans I knew about their bodies. I thought that would be prying into their personal business.

How would you feel if a stranger started to ask you questions about your medical status or genitalia?

By getting to know more and more about “gender identity,” and listening to Trans people, I began to understand and accept Trans as they are.

Trans want to participate in society and in religious community as their whole, true selves.

So do we, right?

I am not alone in this. We want to be accepted.

Many of us have had our own challenges in meeting Transgender individuals. And similar feelings.

Over the past decade, we've always had a few Trans congregants. No one has stayed for very long. As a congregation, I think we have much room for growth with gender identity.

We have the best of intentions to welcome everyone.

We've tried.

I've tried. Several years ago, I hosted a dinner party with my ex. I told him I was inviting some of the BGLT folks from the congregation. He was all for it. What I didn't tell him, was that I had invited the letter "T" only: Trans congregants. I wanted to extend a hand of friendship and make them feel welcome in our community.

We try to welcome everyone here. We want to share our spiritual home with everybody.

We try, but as a congregation, we don't always succeed.

We want to respect each person and their identity. For Trans, the important thing is how they feel inside, not how they look outside.

There are several scriptural stories that speak of Trans folks. Most come from Asian religions. The one I picked for today is from Buddhism. It is very famous.

First, some context. Early Buddhism argued whether women could attain enlightenment. Or whether women should become monks. There are a lot of stories about these two issues. In today's reading, Buddha's senior disciples are arguing about these things.

The initial Buddhist answer was that a woman had to reincarnate as a man to attain enlightenment. Or to become a monk. That is the attitude of several of the monks in today's story. That is the attitude in some Buddhist societies as well.

Reincarnate as a man. A very misogynistic attitude.

Today's reading counters that argument.

The traditional interpretation of the reading explains that male and female are temporary categories. Buddhism teaches that the only constant is change. Nothing is permanent. Gender changes from one lifetime to the next. In other words, men and women are the same, except for their bodies. We take on bodies from lifetime to lifetime, like putting on clothing.

The point? There is no essential difference between men and women.

I think the story is really saying that gender is irrelevant when it comes to enlightenment.

This story tries to counter attitudes against women in earlier Buddhism.

The monks are arguing about the role of women. The dragon-king's daughter solves the problem for them. Note: she has no name. She transforms herself into a man. Instantly. And then attains nirvana. Instantly.

That's how she proves she is worthy of enlightenment. By becoming a man.

I think this solution still has misogynistic airs.

There is a joke in the story, though. The monks are arguing about enlightenment. While they argue, the dragon king's daughter attains nirvana right in front of their eyes.

The monks don't.

This certainly says something about those monks and their debate!

A modern reading of this story has a different twist.

The story doesn't say that the nameless dragon-king's daughter reincarnates. No. Instead, she simply changes gender. She becomes a man. Instantly. No rebirth. As a trans man, he attains enlightenment.

So this is one religious story that has a positive attitude toward gender identity. Gender is not set. It can change. Not only in between lives. Also within a life time.

All genders, including Trans, can attain enlightenment.

Buddhists and Unitarian Universalists use scripture for inspiration. The stories and teachings help us to reflect on our own lives. To become better people. To change the world around us.

The story inspires us because it shows the fluidity of gender. And several Asian cultures accept gender variance more than our own American society.

You might remember Aidan. He was a congregant for several years, as a student at Meadville Lombard, our Seminary in Hyde Park. He is now on his ministerial internship in California. He just posted on Facebook that he's been on testosterone for a year now. That's obviously public knowledge.

I asked him about feeling welcomed here at 2U. I asked several other Trans congregants as well.

They all had some good advice to share. I'm passing it on to you.

Like any other oppressed group, don't expect Trans people who come through your doors to teach you.

You need to seek out Trans resources and educate yourselves first.

In other words, you need to begin your own soul work on Trans issues. On gender identity. You need to explore your own feelings and ideas. That's spiritual work.

And you need to get some good information. Learn about Trans issues.

This week, I'm asking you for some individual reflection.

How do you understand gender identity? How do you know what you know about Trans? Most importantly, what are your opinions and feelings about Trans?

And you need to reflect on your congregation as well.

How well does your congregation serve Transgender persons? Or people struggling with gender identity?

How would Trans feel welcome in your congregation? What might you do to create a stronger welcoming presence?

Also, look up some info about Trans issues and gender identity from reliable websites. You can begin with the UUA web site, uua.org. It has various resources..

Soul work begins with the individual examination of conscience, and proceeds to the congregation.

We as a congregation also need to do our soul work on trans issues. Collectively, we need to examine our perceptions.

We at 2U have taken some steps to welcome Trans people.

For example, the downstairs bathrooms are gender neutral. Any one can use them. They have been for several years now.

But we still do not include “gender identity” in our bylaws and policies. They list “sexual orientation,” but not “gender identity.” Sexual orientation is not the same as gender identity.

We need to make that change.

We also do not include “gender identity” in our welcome statement at the start of worship. We need to say that all genders are welcome here, not just men and women.

We have never had a Trans minister. We’ve had straight and gay and lesbian parish ministers and community ministers. But no Trans minister.

Our denomination is one of the very few that ordains Trans people, but Trans ministers have the hardest time finding churches. In spite of our best wishes, we reflect the pattern of discrimination present in our larger society.

We need to consider this possibility seriously when we’ll be searching for our next parish minister in the following years.

The UUA has a program to help us with our soul work on Trans issues. It is called Living the Welcoming Congregation. It is the follow-up to the Welcoming Congregation program. We completed that certification over a decade ago. It’s time for a refresher.

Living the Welcoming Congregation addresses transgender, transsexual, intersex, gender identity, gender queer, gender non-conforming, gender expression, biological sex, FTM, and MTF. Lots of concepts!

And other issues as well. It continues the journey of personal and congregational study, reflection, and response.

We need to reach out to those who are marginalized. And Trans people are the most marginalized group in our society.

Being welcoming to all people is an on-going process. It takes a life-time of exploration.