

PUSHING THROUGH FEAR TO AN OPEN HEART

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I wasn't sure what to focus on for this "Justice Sunday" sermon. There is, unfortunately, a wide variety of topics that could be covered. The war in Iraq is the most obvious and certainly an appropriate topic, for sure. I thought about everything from racism and human rights – sometimes subtle, sometimes pervasive – to immigration and reproductive rights. Immigration is a fresh topic in everyone's mind these days, so I can't resist the opportunity to mention the little discrepancy in the "protect our borders" argument with, well, the obvious omission of a push to build a wall along the border of Canada. Could it be racial issues we're talking about here, and not really just immigration? Hmmmm. But that's not the topic I chose. I thought about the social justice issues associated with access to reproductive rights – a battle I am all too familiar with as a former Planned Parenthood staff person who has argued before hearings in the Virginia Senate to help people understand the simple formula for success – access to reproductive health care, early and often, is the best way to prevent abortion and create happy mothers when women are permitted to decide for themselves when to become a parent. I could talk about the right to marry by extolling the virtues of two people who love each other being permitted to enjoy the same matrimonial bonds, trappings and benefits as the rest of us. I would be very comfortable with any of these topics – to me, they are no-brainers.

Instead, however, I'd like to talk about something that has – at times in my life – pushed me thoroughly out of my comfort zone. I'm talking about understanding, accepting and feeling comfortable around people who identify as "transgender" – the "T" in GLBT. I

have not had a lot of opportunities to build that comfort level, so in all fairness, I haven't had a lot of practice.

The first time I ever saw someone who was transgender was at a women's spiritual retreat in Norfolk, Virginia in the early 1990's. I was looking at some books and brochures on a display table, and noticed a hand reaching for a book. It was a rather large, masculine looking hand – but it had finger nail polish on it. I don't know what I was afraid of, but fear was definitely one of my first reactions. I didn't want to look directly at her/him. I just sort of froze. I finally glanced over to see a rather tall man with broad shoulders, dressed in what I thought were outdated women's clothing, too much make-up, a wig and a very large – and honestly ugly – purse. Aside from wanting to give her/him some advice about makeup (being the makeup minimalist that I am), I desperately wanted to ask questions. I wanted to ask why he felt the need to dress in women's clothes. I knew very little about transgender people or cross-dressers as this man might have been referred to. I was really curious – but could not muster up the courage to approach him/her. I thought if I did, lights would come on and someone would say, “smile, your on candid camera!” But even though I was naïve and really didn't understand him/her at all, I suspected that he was either desperate for attention, or willing to accept the jeers, suspicious looks and criticisms in order to be, or appear to be, what he desperately wanted to be – a woman.

Fast forward to 2006 when I saw a program - I think it was on TLC - that featured a story about a surgeon who has done a number of reassignment surgeries on men to help them to further integrate their new lives as women. It was remarkably interesting and provided me with a better understanding of the deep pain experienced by people born in a body that seems to belong to someone else. It also made me appreciate the incredible

sacrifices - professional, financial and personal - that her patients had to make in order to be comfortable with who they really were. After I watched the program I thought, “wow, and I thought I was nervous about telling Dan’s devout Catholic mother that I had left the Catholic Church to become a UU?”

While I was at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Portland, Oregon last June – my first time at a GA – I met a very interesting woman named “Cheryl” who happened to be sitting next to an empty seat at a lunch table in the very crowded food court area. What a contrast to my first encounter with a transgender person. When I saw her, I thought of this as a great opportunity, my second chance to get it right and not let my fear and ignorance keep me from having an interesting conversation with what appeared to be an interesting person. So I sat down next to her (yes, “her” – the TV program helped me to understand that if she identified as a woman, I should acknowledge her as a female – not him/her or s/he) – so, anyway, I sat down and introduced myself. I didn’t ask her probing questions about why she wanted to be a woman, but rather questions I’d ask anybody else I met there. She told me about where she lives and what a loving and accepting community she lives and works in. I was struck by how incredibly brave she must be to have the courage to totally reinvent her life while suffering enormous untold obstacles, hurts and losses in the process. Obstacles, hurts and losses she will no doubt face for the majority of her life. Let’s face it, we’ve come a long way with women’s rights, civil rights and gay rights – but there’s still a long way to go before people who have reassigned their gender can feel comfortable in our society and where our society is comfortable with them.

After lunch, I thanked her for the company and went back to my schedule for the day. I stopped at the restroom before heading on to my next workshop and I wondered where

the heck Cheryl goes to the bathroom when she's at public events like this? I would imagine it would make a number of men uncomfortable to have her standing at the urinal next to them (if she's not reassigned, and no, I didn't ask), or even in the stall. And we women might feel a bit uncomfortable having someone who we may not view as "entirely" female in our restroom.

During the GA's "All Assembly" meetings where delegates from UU churches across the country hear about and vote on resolutions, there are also opportunities for people to speak for and against particular resolutions. During one of the comment sessions a woman (transgender) got up and spoke out about the challenges she and others face, even in the UU church, and that the church needed to open their eyes to their own fears about transgender people. And I wondered what we would do, here in our little church in Loudoun County, if a transgender person came in and sat down next to you or me. Or if someone in our congregation announced that he, or she, was going to reassign their gender. Or that they were a cross-dresser. How would that "fly"? Would we gladly welcome them and encourage them to come back next week, bring their family, sign the guest book in the back? Or would we be afraid of what our church would look like to others by associating ourselves with this person? Would we be concerned that we would not be viewed as a family friendly church? Would the presence of this person evoke fear or discomfort? Or, what about outside the church? If we saw a transgender person at a restaurant, would we stare? Would we be nervous about what we would say to our children if they asked questions? I would be! I can honestly say that if I was at a restaurant or a store with my grandchildren and we saw Cheryl, I would have a difficult time figuring out what to say to them.

The following is an excerpt from an article by Donald E. Skinner in the Winter 2007 UU WORLD magazine called, “Congregations Welcome Transgender People.”

Harold Ganow had known since age three that being male just didn't feel right. He even picked a new name way back then, “Carol,” that he used when he thought about being female.

Throughout school and into college and a career as a scientist, that unease about gender identity continued. Then in the early '90s, when he was in his forties, he did something about it. He came out as female and changed his name to Carol.

One of the places Carol Ganow came out was Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado, where she'd been a member less than a year. JUC saved her life, she said. When her transition led to divorce, losing her job, and the loss of her children's custody, she edged toward suicide. “But I had friends at church who kept me going,” she said.

She had doubted that she'd be welcome at any church. She'd had transgender friends who were booted out of other churches. At JUC Ganow felt support. She learned later that some were frightened, and at least one family left the church—but for the most part there was acceptance. “I learned that I'm simply one quite normal variant of the human condition,” she said.

Unitarian Universalist congregations, which have been welcoming to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, have begun to embrace transgender people. “Transgender” describes people who transcend the traditional understanding of male and female.

Transgender people have been supported by the Unitarian Universalist Association officially since 1996 when “transgender” was added to the name of the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian,

and Transgender Concerns, or OBGLTC [we love our acronyms!]. Delegates at the UUA's 2007 General Assembly this past June took that support another step forward by approving the first-ever GA resolution in support of transgender people.

The resolution came in response to a report by UUA President William G. Sinkford, who highlighted the support that congregations in Florida had provided to Largo city manager Steve (now Susan) Stanton, who was fired after he announced he would undergo gender reassignment surgery. The GA resolution, affirming support for "the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, including transgender individuals," was initiated by the Rev. Manish Mishra, minister of the UU Church of Saint Petersburg, Florida.

How does one transfer the compassion and understanding we have for all people to those who might make us uncomfortable? Or even make us fearful and anxious? How do we KNOW what to say or do? It's not like they offered a class in high school called, "Making Friends With People Who Freak You Out." I actually overheard someone during the debate on the resolution at the GA say that, because the UU church is so open, it tends to attract some "fringe" people. I don't know that he was being mean, or lying even. I think in some ways he's right. We are an open and loving church. We do attract all kinds of people who have been alienated from other churches. I, for example, am a "Recovering Catholic" who came to the UU Church so that I would not have to sit through another Sunday Mass where people were indicted for their very human behaviors. Jesus did no less. He welcomed people into his flock who were rejected by their church, their community. And isn't that what we are doing when we stand up for immigrants who are really targeted because of their race and not their legal status? Isn't that what we do when we advocate for human rights?

I've been accused of wearing my politics and issues on my ass – actually the ass of my car. I bought a bumper sticker years ago that I thought expressed my determination to keep my pro-choice bumper stickers on my car, even though I'd received a number of nasty notes on my windshield and was nearly run off the road by a “pro-life” woman in a station wagon (with her children in the back no less). The sticker says, “I'd rather be hated for who I am, than loved for who I am not.” This is probably an appropriate mantra for Cheryl and Carol. I view my short conversation with Cheryl as a huge marker in my long road to understanding and accepting - truly accepting - people I don't quite understand. She probably does not realize what a valuable teacher she was for me and doubtless is for others. By allowing people at the UU GA, and her local church, to walk with her as she becomes who she will be, she demonstrates what it means to be brave, what it means to be willing to open doors to the unknown and step through – and trust those of her chosen faith to hold her up, and not let her fall. We are the true benefactors of Cheryl's presence. Not the other way around.

So I offer this sermon today to the people who have stood up and said, “Here I am, love me or hate me – I will not pretend to be someone I am not, just to please you.” I offer this sermon today to people who have an open heart and want to learn more about Cheryl and others like her, despite their fears of the unknown in order to take steps, no matter how small, toward understanding - toward acceptance. And, I offer this sermon for those who may one day find the opportunity and the courage to learn more about someone like Cheryl and get to know her as a human being. You may be saving her life.

Please join me for a responsive reading.

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For speaking out, even when it meant upsetting the norm
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time we overcame our fears to open our minds and hearts
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time we have tried to understand our anger before striking out
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time we've shared our bounty to meet the needs of others
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the self-less acts that ground us in our humanity
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the times we follow the wisdom of the spirit
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For losing sight of our unity
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time we focus our efforts based on the foundation of our unity
We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

For those and so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and so many acts, both evident and subtle, which have joined us with our
brothers and sisters in humanity

We are thankful for the light that guides us when we commit to act in love.

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