

Binary Thinking

The email appeared one Friday evening in the spring of 2004. She'd read on our website that we welcomed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. She was looking for a church, she wrote, and clearly she wanted to make sure that we really meant what we said about being welcoming to trans people. She was in her late thirties and just beginning the transition from male to female, a transgender person. I learned later that her marriage was just breaking up, that she hadn't yet talked with her three children about her gender identity and was quite worried about that. But, she felt better about who she was than she had in a long time. That Friday, she was looking for a place where she could connect with the holy and be accepted for who she was. I told her we'd love to have her come and I'd be there on Sunday to welcome her.

Our country has made real strides in the last 60 years in terms of equal rights for people of color. And while forty years ago gay and lesbian people were second-class citizens in this country, now there are 16 states in which we can marry. But, like people with mental illness, transgender people are still widely discriminated against, looked down upon, and shamed.

This week is Transgender Awareness Week. Last week, for the first time, the US Senate passed a bill to end discrimination across our country against not just gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, but also transgender people. It will fail in the House, but its passage in the Senate is an important marker of how far we have come, and who that "we" is starting to include. So this is a good day to share the story of why this Sunday, like every Sunday, someone reads a welcome statement from that lectern, and it always includes an explicit welcome to those who are transgender.

After I got the email that weekend back in 2004, I told several others in church that we had a transgender visitor coming, and we did make her feel very welcome. She hadn't yet settled on her new name, it would become Jennifer or Jen a couple months later. Over the next few months, I heard about her struggles, the years filled with anger and depression and pain spent trying to change her thoughts and feelings so she could fit the male body she'd been born to. She was a very good person, and I was glad she had come to our church. She needed us. And we needed her. That same year, around Thanksgiving, I received this email:

"Hello everyone,

With Thanksgiving upon us, I felt I should take a moment and send a special note of thanks to all those people who have been so supportive during the ups and downs of this very trying year. Some of you who are receiving this e-mail have never met Jen; others have never met Jack. But regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, as I move forward in dealing with my gender issue, please know that you have all helped me more than you will ever know.

When this year began, I found myself asking 'Why me'? Why did I have to have this condition? Why did resolving it have to cause so much pain and suffering to the people I care about most? I was angry and bitter about who I was and the thought of living, at times, seemed unbearable. Now, a few months later, I again find myself asking 'Why me'? But this time the context is 'Why am I so lucky'? Why am I so fortunate to have so many wonderful and caring people in my life? I could not possibly have achieved this

turnaround without your friendship and support. I know I will never be able to fully express my gratitude to all of you. I only hope that I can be as good a friend to you as you have been to me.

I hope you all take some time this holiday to acknowledge those people who are important to you and that you are grateful to have as part of your lives. I know I am grateful all of you are part of mine.

With best wishes for a happy holiday,
Jen”

Jen was the first transgendered person I got to know well.

At the time, I was afraid of transgender people, though I was trying to be an ally.

At the time, I lived in a zero-sum world – I feared there wasn’t enough compassion for all of us, and I was struggling for social acceptance of what I saw as my own group, lesbian and gay people. It will have been ten years ago tomorrow that the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that same sex couples had the right to get married in this state. Before and after that ruling, there was a real struggle to see the ruling upheld by the Legislature.

At the time, I thought “we” might never win acceptance and our legal rights if the “we” included trans people.

Jen helped me. She brought a human face to the stories of transgender people, the struggles with pervasive discrimination and harassment that trans people face because they do not conform to that male/female binary our first reading mentioned. And Jen helped me become a better ally to trans people, because I knew and grew to care about her.

Some of us here may be uncomfortable, or even very uncomfortable, with transgender people or even talking about trans people. I still have a level of internal fear that I have to acknowledge and work with, just as I must acknowledge the racism and homophobia still exists internally.

And the work to deal with this fear is not intellectual. We need the chance to know and care about people like Jen in order to get through the knothole of understanding and engagement with the issues transgender people face in terms of their safety, rights, and dignity. But all we can do is begin where we are. And that’s good enough.

Transgender is actually a very broad term. It encompasses everyone who doesn’t fit in with, in some way, their biologically-assigned gender.

It includes those who, like Jen, feel that they were a woman born in the body of a man, or vice versa.

It includes those who feel very uncomfortable acting as the social roles of their gender dictate, or who prefer to dress in the clothes of the gender other than their biological one.

Other trans people biologically have both male and female sex organs – in earlier times we called these folks hermaphrodites or inter-sexed.

And then there's another group of trans people – they don't want to be pigeon-holed as either male or female, it is painful for them. In fact, they resist the whole idea of two categories as adequate to describe reality.

This last kind of trans person is the most baffling to the non-transgender community. Which is just another way of saying we are unable to do with them what we want to do, which is fit them into one of those pairs of two opposites, those binaries as the reading put it, like good/bad, black/white, 0s and 1s. In this case the binary is male and female.

Our not being able to call such trans people male or female can be very uncomfortable for us given our deeply ingrained binary either/or thinking around gender.

And it is also a gift.

All transgender people are of inherent worth and dignity. We need to treat all trans people, and help others to treat them, with fairness, justice, compassion and love. That's a benefit owed to them. But there are highly significant benefits to be had for ourselves in that effort.

Engaging with trans people seriously and respectfully challenges our deeply ingrained either/or thinking habits, a good thing because binary thinking is very strong in our culture and not always helpful.

The educator and philosopher John Dewey observed many years ago that “mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either/Or, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities.” Actually, this kind of either/or binary thinking is more western than universal.

We do see binary thinking in Chinese culture, for example in the concepts of yin and yang (male/female), but this is different from our either/or thinking. In this case, the two opposites like male and female exist at two ends of a spectrum, and in between the two pure poles are many gradations of combinations. This can be called Both/And binary thinking, and it allows us to generate many other possibilities than simply the two poles of bad/good, or male/female, or right/wrong. It allows us to see shades of grey, rather than simply mutually exclusive options.

John Michael Greer, the archdruid who blogged our first reading, theorizes that binary thinking is actually hardwired into our brains. He writes:

“There's good reason why it should be. Most of the snap decisions our primate ancestors had to make on the African savannah are most efficiently sorted out into binary pairs: food/nonfood, predator/nonpredator, and so on. The drawbacks to this handy set of internal categories probably became an issue only when the structure of the reasoning mind took shape over the top of the standard-issue social primate brain.

The difficulty is one of overgeneralizing a good idea. There's no significant middle ground between food and nonfood, say, or between predator and nonpredator, and so the reactive response we're discussing excludes the possibility of middle ground.

Th[is] hardwired habit of snap judgments in binary form is always right below the surface. In most cases all it takes is a certain amount of stress to trigger it.”

I see three big problems with our either/or binary thinking. The first is the one Greer mentions, that it makes it hard for us to make good, nuanced decisions in a complex world.

The second is that the pairs of opposites almost always include a degree of value judgment, some flavor of good/bad better than/less/than present in most of the opposites that matter to us. For example, of food or nonfood, clearly food is good, non-food is bad. Similarly, of right/wrong, right is good, wrong is bad, pretty much all of the time. And of male or female, male has been considered better, and female less than in much of recent western culture... Think, Adam and Eve... right to control one's own body, and so on.

The third problem with either/or binary thinking is that since it is a habit of quick judgment, it leads us to make snap judgments and thus hurts our ability to connect empathetically with other people.

You can see where I'm going. Given the limitations on our ability to relate to others well and solve complex problems when we think in either/or alternatives, we can only benefit from being challenged to explore the world in a more complex way. And engaging with trans people does this, because we are challenged to not force-fit someone into a category in which they really don't belong.

This is hard, it makes us very uneasy, so often we try even harder to fit them into one or the other of the two gender categories. It can be a bad feedback loop. Shifting away from overdependence on either/or mode of thinking is far easier said than done. Getting to know trans people is just one way to challenge ourselves to go beyond our binary thinking. We need to do both things. We need to learn to think ternary, as our reading described it, or at least in a “both/and” way that allows us to hold two thing in our heads that are opposites as true.

We also need to learn to support and respect trans people. The reality is that there are transgender people, people who don't fit into our neat male/female categories in many of the cultures around the world, including the Mayan, the Native American, and Indian. You can find evidence in such cultures of people who were acknowledged as neither male nor female but a third “other” gender (just what that “other” was varied tremendously depending on the cultural context). Just like those of us who fit more or less easily into the categories of male and female, trans people deserve and need justice, fairness, love and respect.

I was very lucky Jen, the transitioning trans woman, came into my life when she did. Five years later, my youngest child began coming out as a transgender youth. At 17, we now call him Oscar rather than his female birth name. He started telling us at 13 that he was transgender, but it was difficult for me and his other mother to accept. It was especially hard because he insisted that he didn't fit the binary of male/female, and indeed sometimes looked to me female and other times male. It would have been much harder without having known Jen.

Still, I was so stuck in binary thinking that it took me a long time to even start to fathom that someone could really be anything other than either male or female, just as you were only either right or wrong, politically left or right, morally good or bad. But as the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote,

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

My friends, we are called by our values to love others, to respect them, to call them by the names they wish to be called and defend their right, their freedom to live life as they need to. It's so much better than unknowingly condemning people to suffer because of rigid either/or ideas about who they should be, because of our need to have neat polarities and a binarily sliced-up reality. It may be that the only way to really get to that point is by getting to know and care about someone who is transgender. May we each be open to that experience, may there always be more to learn, and people with whom we may risk learning. And may "doubts and loves dig up the world, like a mole, a plow."

Amen and blessed be.

*A sermon delivered by Rev. Meg Soens at
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Medfield.*
