
TRANS-FORMATION & TRANS EXPERIENCES

Focus

For years, MCC has been learning and striving to empower and include transgender and gender variant people at every level of our congregational and corporate life. In our society at large, transgender people and issues of vital importance to them and their families often get neglected or pushed to the sidelines. This is also true too frequently in our churches. The focus of this discussion presents an opportunity for participants to grow in their awareness of the variety of gender variant experiences, and more importantly, to explore the nature of transformation that is one part of transgender journeys.

A Testimony about Trans-formation & Trans Experiences

I AM: A Journey into the Realm of Gender Variance
Contributed by Emma Lee Chattin

I AM

A poem written for the 11th Annual TransGender Day of Remembrance (Remembering Our Dead), November 20, 2009

I defied the gender binary.
I challenged the first pronouncement ever made about me.
I questioned the evidence my body presented to me,
and I took issue with the guidance of my parents,
who assumed,
and nudged my life down one path
without even asking me
if that's where I wanted to go.

I confounded my society and my culture,
and I ignored what I was told was the norm.

I lived on the edges
and I defied definitions.

I am far more than the names I have been called.

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I have done many things and lived many lives.
I am the rule-breaker, the exception, the trickster ¹,
the one who divides and multiplies the gender binary
until it becomes a string of infinite possibilities.

In ancient times I was celebrated
as one who walked in many worlds.
I was revered as the one who embodied transformation
and who showed the world
we can change

But ancient wisdom has long been forgotten
and now I pay the price for our forgetfulness.
We tend to behave badly toward
that which we do not understand,
and therein lies the pain.
Like all of creation, I am a mystery.

I don't seek to be understood.
I just seek to be accepted.

¹ "In mythology, folklore, Native American oral tradition, and religion, a trickster is a god, goddess, spirit, man, woman, or anthropomorphic animal who plays tricks or otherwise disobeys normal rules and conventional behavior." ... "Frequently the Trickster figure exhibits gender and form variability, changing gender roles and engaging in same-sex practices. Such figures appear in Native American and First Nations mythologies, where they are said to have a two-spirit nature. Loki, the Norse trickster, also exhibits gender variability, in one case even becoming pregnant." (from [Wikipedia](#))

Transformation often happens somewhere on the journey between our attempts at understanding something, and accepting it. I think good religion should teach us about mystery and about living in the place (space?) between questions and answers. If it teaches us anything at all about assurance, it should be the assurance that controlling, or even fully understanding the things around us, is really not necessary.

When I turned six my father had a long conversation with me about the correct presentation of my gender. I was going to school with other children, after all, and so I had to present myself as a boy. There would be no more wearing dresses around the house or walking in high heels, and my long hair would have to be cut, sheared off to a short buzz of fuzz. I was devastated. I had no say in the matter. My entire sense of my self had been taken away from me with the wave of an electric hair clipper and a garbage bag full of play clothes. My parents could not understand that I was a girl, and there was nothing that I could say to make them understand. So I cried, and told my dad, "Ok, so you won't let me be a girl, but one day you'll see- I'm going to grow up to be a woman!" My father told me that would never happen. It was a very difficult year for a very young child.

One evening, my family gathered around the television set to watch Star Trek. The episode featured a woman who completely transformed herself, presenting variously as a woman, a much younger woman, a man, and an African American man. My parents focused on the latter transformation, saying that the imagery should hopefully spark good discussion in America's living rooms (it was, after all, 1966). But the transformation that sparked my imagination was from the woman to the man, and then back to a woman again. I was captivated. Of course, the woman turned out to be an alien life form, the "last of its kind", and the "creature" ultimately died a pitiful and painful death. Looking back, it's sad to think that I had finally found someone I could identify with.

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School continued to be a horrible experience for me, long days filled with an intense sense of psycho-social dissonance – the feeling of knowing who I am, and yet having everyone else perceive and treat me as if I were someone else entirely different. While I tried very hard to fit in, the sensation of feeling like an alien remained with me on some level all through my school years.

When I went to college, I learned that I was actually not “the last of my kind”, that there were others out there like me. This was a revelation! I was not alone! My excitement was short-lived, however, because I learned this in my abnormal psychology class, a class which, by the way, also taught me exactly how the world felt about me and my people (suddenly, being a solitary alien from another planet didn't seem so bad after all).

Up until that point I had planned on becoming a minister. Many of my classes were designed with seminary in mind. I had hoped I would find some answers in the study of religion. Yet the things I was told about my people (and thus, my self) in my abnormal psychology class so devastated me, and the fact that I was attending a Methodist college that made it known, in no uncertain terms, that the church had no place for people like me, I immediately left any thoughts of religion behind, and promptly did what all good college students do when they are uncertain about things. I changed my major to psychology.

I was trying to understand myself, and yet, I felt more alienated than ever. As the years passed, I would occasionally think back to that Star Trek episode, and while I had turned away from organized religion, I never turned away from God. Eventually I transitioned my life into a body and a life that fit me much better, discovered MCC, and began a different journey all together.

Psychology provided no specific answer as to why I am as I am, and it is ironic to me that I eventually found my peace in the very thing that initially drove me away on my journey: religion.

You see, the Jesus Story is all about transformation. In fact, the entire Bible is about transformation. It's about Change, Growth, and Becoming. Each one of us is far more than we think we are. The belief that we are not, or that we are somehow not even enough, is driven by a popular culture that finds it more profitable to keep us feeling inadequate. The fact is, you are not just a human being, you are a human becoming.... becoming something more. Sometimes much more. And it is perceptibly “alien” life-forms like me (who have been inexplicably driven from most churches) who can demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, that transformation is not only possible, it happens, and it walks among us.

Yes, I finally took refuge in another “alien”, another “other”, the Ultimate Other; one who is both male and female, and neither; one who has many names, but ultimately, simply prefers to self identify as, “I Am”; one in whose image we may be made, and yet, one who cannot be understood by us (and one who has repeatedly told us not to even try or to pretend to); and one whose presence we can experience and accept in our world without having to understand.

We humans are a curious lot. We want to understand the things around us. Sometimes our desire to do so even drives us to distraction. How many times have friends walked away from me shaking their heads, saying, “I just don't understand it!”, as if understanding who I am is a necessary prerequisite of allowing me to be a part of their world, as if I somehow have to explain who I am at every turn of the corner. Poppycock. We humans are a curious lot indeed.

Yet our desire to understand things usually leads us on amazing adventures...
... to explore new worlds... to boldly go where.... Well, you know....

Some Centering Quotes on Transformation & Trans Experiences

“Religion [should teach] us that our lives here on earth are to be used for transformation”.
(Huston Smith, b 1919, religious scholar)

Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through.
Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it.
This is a kind of death.
(Anaïs Nin, 1903-77, French author)

“God is clearly more comfortable with diversity than we are, and God’s final goal and objectives are much simpler. God, and the entire cosmos itself, are about two things: differentiation and communion. Physicists seem to know this better than theologians and clergy.

If this were cheap liberalism, I would be merely arguing for personal rights, economic justice, or sexual freedom. If this were mere ideology, I would need to line up my credible arguments and proofs. I have very few. I, like many of you, am only a disciple of the poor man from Nazareth. He has made me content with mystery. He has made me less afraid of chaos. He has told me that control is not my task.

He, like the cosmos itself, is about two things : diversity and communion.
The whole of creation cannot be lying”.
(Richard Rohr, O.F.M, in *Where The Gospel Leads Us*)

“... Transgender Christians need to know that hope and opportunity are indeed possible for us even within the church, an institution that has usually been somewhat less than welcoming toward those of us with gender differences.

Here’s some good news to begin with: God loves gender-variant persons faithfully and unequivocally, accepting and welcoming us freely and fully into the family of believers just as we are. This fact has nothing to do with our individual merits or demerits, but with God’s loving outreach toward us and energy within us. God has chosen each of us to embody unique aspects of the Godhead within our gender and other particularities. No earthly human being, no organization, no religion, no denomination, no authority figure, and no oppressive system of belief can ever take us from God’s presence within us.”
(Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan in *Transgender Journeys*)

“The very existence of transgendered and intersex people brings into question the binary categories that our society has created with such fervor. If transgendered [and intersex] persons, by our presence, break down binary thinking by inhabiting a middle place, then this disintegration of polemic categories affects the way we do theology as well. Theology is different if we apply it to a transgendered way of thinking. If we recognize and insist on the presence of things that transcend, encompass, or fail to fit the categories at all, then we approach seemingly opposite looking things for that which binds them together, or goes beyond them altogether. This process requires the thinker not to accept seemingly divergent points at face value, and calls for a deeper and broader look at them.

When we begin to move away from oppositional categories, we see how two things that were once thought to be opposites can exist at the same time in a positive tension.”
(Justin Tanis in *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Transformation & Trans Experiences

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): When were you first taught what it meant to be a woman or a man? What did you learn? How did you fit (or not fit) into that understanding? When was the first time you were ever aware of crossing a gender norm? What happened?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Søren Kierkegaard said that we live our lives forward, but they can only be understood backward. Looking back over your life, what are some of the moments that stand out to you as transformative moments? Do those moments share anything in common with one another? Has your desire to understand something ever stood in your way of accepting it?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights about yourself and the world around you did you gain from thinking about and sharing your experiences and listening to the experiences of others?

Additional Thoughts About Transformation & Trans Experiences

MCC Stories, Our Stories

There is a wide spectrum of gender expressions that claim a home in the world of MCC. Not all of them can be easily tagged and labeled. In fact, few of them can. Many gender expressions, behaviors, and presentations look similar on the surface, but the underlying feelings that give birth to these expressions can be quite different. Individuals may self-identify in a multitude of ways (for example, I identify as GLBTIQQ, for all are valid parts of my journey). It's best never to assume anything. It's also important to know that within many gender sub-cultures, it isn't really good form to ask questions about an individual's origin and history. Those who have undergone transformative gender experiences generally move in mysterious ways. Yet, by replacing curiosity with acceptance, I think we are taught something very important about the world in which we live, and how we may best live our life within it. We, ourselves, are able to enter that space between the question and the answer, a place where I believe transformation is not only possible, but natural; even necessary.

I believe there is an essential transformative connection between the many letters that form the LGBTIQQ community. Yet I look at our community sometimes and I am moved to tears when I see such a sea of souls who share so much in common, but yet, who are sometimes unable to connect with one another simply because they don't understand each other (hint: *understanding is not a prerequisite to acceptance; in fact, the pursuit of it can even prove an obstacle to the process*).

The fact is, we in the LGBTIQQ community are ALL Gender Transgressors, either in appearance, behavior, expression, or choice of life partner. We are all transgressing gender norms in some way. I believe that this is a patch of Holy Ground upon which we may all converge, and meet one another without assumption, expectation, or preconception. This is the place where we may all come to rest.

There are some people in this world who claim to know God, to understand God, and to be able to introduce God to others; yet, all the while this may be far less fruitful than encouraging individuals to seek out God for a personal experience of their own, one without assumption, expectation, or preconception.

And the Divinity I have encountered, by the way, is totally Trans. ☺

Biblical Passages About Transformation

2 Corinthians 5:17

Romans 12:2

Galatians 3:23-28

John 3:1-12

Ezekiel 37: 1-22

Acts 8:26-40

Matthew 19:12

Genesis 17:3-5, 15-16

John 20:13-17

Genesis 1:1-31

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): What are the most powerful testimonies of transgender people that you have heard? What might the life experiences of gender variant people have to tell us about God, in whose image we are all created? What insights about the experience of “transformation” does gender variance offer?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Assuming that full inclusion of gender variant people means that they are woven into the community rather than being set apart in some way, are gender variant people included in your local congregation (e.g. are there visible transgender leaders in your community, are transgender stories included as sermon illustrations, does your community observe the Transgender Day of Remembrance, etc.)? How about the larger context of MCC as a movement?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How can MCC welcome people across the gender spectrum without exploiting gender variant people (e.g. tokenizing them or making them “poster children”)?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights did you take away from your small group discussion? What was the most challenging/meaningful idea you heard/read in this study?

Pulling it All Together: A Labyrinth Ritual

The Labyrinth has been around for thousands of years as a tool for spiritual self-discovery. The singular path calls and directs one inward to the center, and then, back outward.

A suitable ritual invoking reflection along one’s gender path could be developed around the Labyrinth. As one moves inward with each step, one would be encouraged to recall and reflect upon some of the more significant moments of gender identity or dissonance over their life path, eventually reaching the center of the Labyrinth (and themselves). On the path back out, one would then be encouraged to think about the many ways they may authentically express their gender identity to the outer world around them.

Search your local area for a full-size labyrinth. Many churches and/or organizations have labyrinths they will allow others to use. If a full-size labyrinth is not available, you can make copies of an image of a labyrinth for people to “walk” by tracing the path with their fingers.

Additional Resources

Boenke, Mary, Ed. *Trans Forming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones*. Imperial Beach, CA: Walker Troom Pub, 1999.

Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Brown, Mildred L. and Chloe Ann Rounsley. *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism--For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston: Beacon, 1998.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors : Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.

Howell, Clare and Joan Nestle and Riki Wilchins, Eds. *GenderQueer: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 2002.

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007.

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey and Vanessa Sheridan. *Transgender Journeys*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003.

Rothblatt, Martine. *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender*. New York: Crown, 1995.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.

Tanis, Justin Edward. *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003.

Tigert, Leanne McCall and Maren C. Tirabassi, Eds. *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, And Spirituality*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004.

Wilchins, Riki Anne. *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*

Movies:

Call Me Malcolm

Ma Vie En Rose (My Life in Pink)

Transgeneration

MCC Web Resource:

MCC Transgender Ministries: <http://www.tdor.mccchurch.org/>