

Blessing the Identity Border Crossers
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June 10, 2018

A young boy once approached his father to ask, “Dad, why does the wind blow?” to which the father responded, “I don’t know, son.” “Dad, where do the clouds come from?” “I’m not sure, son.” “Dad, what makes a rainbow?” “No idea, son.” “Dad, do you mind me asking you all these questions?” “Not at all, son. How else are you going to learn?”¹

Learning who we are and where we fit in the world is something that begins as soon as we enter this world and when we have open hearted role models, they leave lots of room for wonder and exploration to fill in the blanks.

In and between those graces, the world fills in plenty with words that come early: What a strong young boy. What a pretty little girl. On and on it goes until we are wrapped in identity packages that hold onto us throughout our lives, unless we break them down, or they break us down as the case may be.

The cultural expectation is that one’s biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression will align in stereotypical ways: that someone who is male will identify as a man and have a masculine gender expression and be attracted to a woman, for example. This expectation does not serve our diverse world and the myriad experiences of self that exist, as we know

Biological sex refers to biology. Gender refers to an internal sense of being a man, a woman, neither of these, both, and so on—it is one’s inner sense of being and one’s own understanding of how one relates to the gender binary. With the exception of agender people, who often do not have an internal sense of gender, most people have a gender identity. Trans people, or gender benders, are those whose biological sex does not have a direct correlation to their gender identity.

Gender identity has always been a social construct managed by those with power who also manage its constructs and the shapes of desire. I remember taking a class at divinity school on Islam and Women taught by Dr. Leyah Ahmed, a premier Islamic feminist, and there was a student from Iran in the class who was a journalist and author.

She was writing a book on desire and Iran and she was able to gain access to pictures kept at the palace during one of the early empires of the most desirable women. She showed us these pictures of gorgeous women with full beards and mustaches. The relationship between the shape of identity and gender has always been constructed by the most powerful.

¹ Barb Greve, “Mmm...Goodness,” *Keynote address given to the St. Lawrence District Assembly on 30 April 2011*<https://barbsbantering.wordpress.com/page/2/?blogsub=confirming>

In her book, *Exile and Pride* Eli Clare writes “Gender reaches into (dis)ability; (dis)ability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race... everything finally piling into a single human body. To write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze.”

This I know, and yet the question remains: where to start? Maybe with my own white skin, stubbly red hair, left ear pierced, shoulders set slightly off center, left riding higher than right, hands trembling, traced with veins, legs well-muscled. Or with me in the mirror, dressing to go out, knotting my tie, slipping into my blazer, curve of hip and breast vanishing beneath my clothes. Or possibly with the memory of how my body felt swimming in the river, chinook fingerlings nibbling at my toes. There are a million ways to start, but how do I reach beneath the skin?”²

Reaching beneath the skin is a place so few are able to travel for so many who are trying to survive in their skin, as people and genders and classes with dignity and a right to health care and housing that might just offer them room to do more than survive. According to a study at MIT the richest 1 percent of men lives 14.6 years longer on average than the poorest 1 percent of men, while among women in those wealth percentiles, the difference is 10.1 years on average.³ Never mind what happens for those who are trans whose medical care and insurance possibilities have not even begun to reach modern standards. Trans people face an unemployment rate 3 times higher than the average and their homeless and homicide rates within that community reflect this.

Why do we seek to erase difference? Why not uplift it, celebrate it, honor it, explore it? Why not dance with difference to learn what else there is to inform, remind, connect, reinvigorate, inspire that we missed in this mighty creation of life?

Why is identity such a battleground on which lives are given and lost? There are so many answers of course. One of them is that identity is power and those that have it want to keep it named and cordoned off along with the power and privileges they are afforded by its domains.

We all here have some aspects of our identities that offer us power and privilege. Knowing what those are, taking responsibility for them and naming them, is part of what it is to live in community, to be woke, to walk together aware of who we are and how this keeps us in and outside of circles of privilege.

Can I name who I am and share those names with others, allow other names that are not mine to live beside me? Can I exist while you exist? Can I be whole while you are whole? Does your difference make my difference less comfortable? Can we live side by side?

² Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride* (South End Press: Cambridge 1999) 123, Quoted in Barb Greve, “Mmm...Goodness,” *Keynote address given to the St. Lawrence District Assembly on 30 April 2011*<https://barbsbantering.wordpress.com/page/2/?blogsub=confirming>

³ <http://news.mit.edu/2016/study-rich-poor-huge-mortality-gap-us-0411>

What conversations, signs, pronouns, medical care, languages do we need that we do not have yet? How do we go about gaining these? Can I be she while you are ze or does your ze turn my she upside down so that I have to erase you to turn right side up again? Why are we so fragile?

Howard Thurman writes in his book *The Search for Common Ground*, "I have always wanted to be *me* without making it difficult for you to be *you*."⁴ Mr. Barb Greve, co-moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association and a transgender man writes in his Keynote address given to the St. Lawrence District Assembly on 30 April 2011:

"Much as I like the sentiment behind Thurman's comments, I'm not sure it is possible...the more I have learned about other identities, the more I am aware of privileges I am granted, privileges which sometimes I need to be willing to give up to in order to help bring about the complicated world I desire."⁵

Barb goes on, "For those of us that benefit from society's favor and privileges, we are often not aware of the existence of certain types of 'otherness,' which in turn suggests that we may not be aware of that aspect of our own identity. This is ok as long as we are willing to be open to learning new things about ourselves, knowing that our process of learning may be uncomfortable for all involved."⁶

What privileged parts of your identity do you need to be willing to give up so that other parts of another identity can thrive?

I will never forget being an intern in a church when one morning before Sunday service a transgendered woman named Lilly came in off the street and asked me if she could change and clean herself up in our ladies room. I was unsure what to do, so I figured I would just guard the ladies room door for her.

When some of the women from church went in there because they said they had to go, they were uncomfortable. They came out again and waited. They said a man was in there and they were not going to go in there while he was in there. Lilly did not consider herself a man. She told me she knew she was a woman from the time she was only 2 or 3 years old.

We all had to talk about this at a board meeting. What does it mean to have gender neutral bathrooms? Is it a distraction from what really matters? Do only liberals who are well fed and have medical care and retirement bother with these discussions while people from

⁴ Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*. (Richmond, IA: 1971), xiii., Quoted in Barb Greve, "Mmm...Goodness," *Keynote address given to the St. Lawrence District Assembly on 30 April 2011*<https://barbsbantering.wordpress.com/page/2/?blogsub=confirming>

⁵ Barb Greve, "Mmm...Goodness," *Keynote address given to the St. Lawrence District Assembly on 30 April 2011*<https://barbsbantering.wordpress.com/page/2/?blogsub=confirming>

⁶ Ibid.

manufacturing towns who are losing their jobs and retirement see us as forgetting what really matters as Americans?

I remember Lilly and that bathroom. She would wait for me every Sunday to stand by for her so the other ladies could be forewarned in case they would be uncomfortable. She was not uncomfortable of course. She knew who she was.

Her parents came from Michigan and once had manufacturing jobs that were outsourced. They had long been unemployed. She knew hardship and loss and what it was to be poor and feel like America had let her down. And still, she needed to go to the bathroom and wash up and put on her lipstick.

Recognizing that another exists who exists outside of categories that dominant groups have constructed, causes fissures in identity dominance. Dominance prefers to remain in control of not only identity but what qualifies as authorized to be labeled as identity. Fighting against this is an American fight. Those people losing manufacturing jobs to outsourcing deserve another solution too. They deserve health care and retirement and an income that allows them access to their dignity and worth. Not struggling to offer it to them, which has nothing to do with immigrants or transgender rights, comes from the same paradigm of power that is denying transgendered people to the military or is introducing 21 anti-trans bills in 10 states this year.

Comes from the same mentality that a baker has a right to not make a cake for a gay wedding couple on Christian religious grounds. Though Jesus would have made that cake and multiplied it too to feed all those suffering from discrimination. Can I get an amen?

How far is a baker from a teacher who then has a right to refuse to teach or a bus driver who has a right to refuse to drive or a public defender who has a right to refuse to defend or a doctor who has a right to refuse to treat?

We must protect the identities of people on the margins, not only because it is their right to own them, live them, live through them, but because without them, we are all lost. Beauty is multiple. God is no noun. Access to truth cannot be fettered or all truth dies.

Beverly Tillery, the executive director of the New York City Anti-Violence Project, said that since 2016 her organization has recorded “a spike in incidents of hate violence” — both homicides and other crimes — against transgender people as well as members of the broader gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

Advocates say the violence is inseparable from the social climate: that anti-transgender violence and anti-transgender laws — like so-called bathroom bills...are outgrowths of the same prejudice.⁷

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/us/transgender-women-killed.html>

Lilly moved to New York City and was murdered later that year.

In order for us all to thrive, a new world must be imagined.⁸

Our Unitarian Universalist faith teaches that all things in this life are connected, not just to each other but also to what was, what is, what is becoming, and what could have been.

As Barb Greve so eloquently writes, “Religion’s role is to provide places where “otherness” can be appreciated and affirmed for all that it is, without a need to conform or assimilate to a dominant societal view. Religion’s role is to defend the porous boundaries, not so that the boundaries become firm but so that the porous quality of those boundaries is always mushy and moving. Religion’s role is to imagine and bring forth a new world that embraces the messiness and mixidity of life. A world that acknowledges that each one of us has something to offer and together the puzzle will make sense.”⁹

You probably know the story of the *Elephant in Dark House as told by Rumi* ...The elephant was in a dark house; In order to see it, many people were going, every one, into that darkness.

As seeing it with the eye was impossible, [each one] was feeling it in the dark with the palm of his hand.

The hand of one fell on its trunk; he said: “This creature is like a water-pipe.”

The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan.

Since another handled its leg, he said: “I found the elephant’s shape to be like a pillar.”

Another laid his hand on its back: he said, “Truly, this elephant was like a throne.”

Similarly, whenever anyone heard [a description of the elephant] he understood [it only in respect of] the part that he had touched.¹⁰

Some say that if a candle were lit, all would have known an elephant stood before them.

But gender is not an elephant, it is not something that lives in its own right. It is rather a magic marker in the hands of those who are given the right to name the elephant as disconnected parts, deciding what belongs where and when and why.

The role of our religion is to make sacred the fluidity between all pieces of what can be, what is and what yet is not.

The role of our religion is to lay claim to the darkness and stop trying to make one disconnected part into the whole but to live with the parts, all the messy pieces of our humanity and let them be as they are on whose bodies they are without demanding what belongs where and how.

⁸ Greve, “Mmm...goodness.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

So few can survive on those well laid out maps that neatly chart where everything belongs. None of us were meant to fit in all of those boxes. Trying to squeeze ourselves into those categories costs lives, integrity and creativity. The greater the difference we are trying to make fit, the greater the suffering of the contortions. The consequences can be extreme for transgendered folk.

We don't need more light; we see just fine. We need more understanding, more willingness to be present to one another, to not be satisfied with disconnected pieces to broken puzzles into which we never fit. We must wrestle the magic markers from the hands of the elephant namers and wield their magic to make visible truths that speak to new worlds, new identities, new parts to new elephants not yet named.

Here's to the identity border crossers who make us all run our fingers along the contours of life and wonder if this story is one that really does belong to us anymore.

Here's to the identity border crossers who unshrink god, who make god a verb again.

Amen.