

May 5, Soulful Sunday
Genderqueer
Rev. Linda Simmons

Ecology is a fascinating word which encompasses all of the patterns of relationships between organisms and their environments, all of the patterns of relationships between organisms and their environments. Ecology is a living, dynamic pattern of interrelatedness that enfolds us all.

Gregory Bateson, married to Margaret Mead for 14 years, moved away from traditional anthropology in the late 1940s, working toward "an ecology of mind." Bateson asks, "What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you?"

Bateson argues that the history of the twentieth century can be perceived as the history of malfunctioning relationships. His famous book, Ecology of the Mind, challenges us all to consider how our ideas and relationships to them and one another.

What thoughts are we fertilizing as individuals and as a community that are composting the possibility of flourishing within and around us? What are the catalysts around us, in this ecology that we are part of creating and being created by, that have contributed to our ideas and positions and feelings?

Are you the person you long for? Are we the people the world around us longs for?

If we see ourselves as gardens, as systems of internal and external relationships that inspire or diminish fruition, it refocuses questions and answers; it asks us to consider the balance of the soil we both tend to and grow within, to locate any poison that stunts our unfurling, and where in and around us lives the elixir that inspires us to reach to the sky and know ourselves and others as expressions of hope?

Some of us have been participating in a class facilitated by Mykal Slack and Alex Kapitan that we call Genderqueer. It is creating an ecology that both inspires us to deepen awareness and to practice our full calling into our humanness, and pushes up against our worry, fear, grief, confusion and privilege.

Alex and Mykal, who are both transgendered, began the 6 part class not with talking about body parts and pronouns but with asking us to consider what constitutes beloved community. They reminded us that we as a world are so far away from beloved community, or a place where all feel welcome and home, on this earth.

They encourage us weekly to focus on the practice rather than the attainment of beloved community and what keeps us from this practice within our minds and hearts. If it is unlikely, we can attain this as a people, then why practice it? We usually practice to gain an outcome we desire. But if we cannot attainment beloved community, then what is the goal?

Along the way, the readings and discussions Alex and Mykal offer us have delineated pronouns and identities, and the many words have both tied us in knots and extended us the delicious freedom of stepping outside of the boxes we live within.

Alex and Mykal seek to liberate the normal from its privilege and allow it to thrive untethered so that all people may be nourished by the acceptance, right to a voice, health care, economic sustenance and life expectancy that living within the category of *normal* cultivates. What do we see when looking at a picture of a person with a beard who is pregnant? Does the word *normal* what comes to mind? If not, why not? That honest reflection has generates fruits on limbs long withered within us.

This is not an academic question. Statistics show that discrimination creates disproportionate harm in people's lives that cannot and do not fit into the confines blessed as acceptable, as normal.

The US Transgender Survey of 2015¹ gathered data from nearly 28,000 transgender people. The following statistics are from that report:

Trans people while in school from grades K-12 experience some form of mistreatment, including being verbally harassed (54%), physically attacked (24%), and sexually assaulted (13%) because they were transgender. 17% experienced such severe mistreatment that they left a school as a result.

A staggering 39% of respondents experienced serious psychological distress in the month prior to completing the survey, compared with only 5% of the U.S. population. Among the starkest findings is that 40% of respondents have attempted suicide in their lifetime—nearly nine times the attempted suicide rate in the U.S. population (4.6%).

Nearly half (47%) of respondents were sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime and one in ten were sexually assaulted in the past year. more than two-thirds (68%) reported that *none* of their IDs had the name and gender their current identity.

Respondents also encountered high levels of mistreatment when seeking health care. In the year prior to completing the survey, one-third (33%) of those who saw a health care provider had at least one negative experience related to being transgender, such as being verbally harassed or refused treatment because of their gender identity.

Undocumented respondents were also more likely to face severe economic hardship and violence than other respondents. In the year prior to completing the survey, nearly one-quarter (24%) of undocumented respondents were physically attacked. Additionally, one-half (50%) of undocumented respondents have experienced homelessness in their lifetime, and 68% have faced intimate partner violence.

¹ <http://www.ustranssurvey.org/>

One in ten (10%) of those who were out to their immediate family reported that a family member was violent towards them because they were transgender.

70-80% of trans women of color have a life expectancy of 35 years old.

Also reported was that support and compassion from family and community alter these statistics. Being seen and affirmed saves lives, ours and others. That is the power of tending to an ecology that has room for all biologies, genders and identities, races, ethnicities, abilities and ages to thrive in the soil of human dignity.

Biology is determined by our genitals. Our mothers are told at birth that we are male or female. Identity is delineated largely by culture. The choices that are sanctified or that breed success and full expression are those most of us strive toward. But as Alex and Mykal, our video presenters have reminded us, identity is also determined by our own calling, our own ability to be present with ourselves and consider who we are and why we are and what we are.

All of this is defined in a network of mutuality, in an ecology of interrelatedness. We learn who we are as we listen to the world's response to us and as we listen to the mystery that is in and between us too.

Being trans is not new. History is rich with examples of those who did not fit in one box or another, who were gender fluid, two-spirit, bi-gender, intersex. Some have even suggested that Jesus, in their fluidity and softness and love and fear and fierce resistance, was gender fluid.

I used the word their for Jesus with a singular form of to be, was. Some would say this is grammatically incorrect but grammar is another tool for keeping things contained, understood with ease, defined in culturally acceptable ways. And understanding with ease is not the highest goal. Sometimes holy confusion is the prescription we all need.

Many of us ask: all these new pronouns, gender identity terms...why are they needed? Why not create one word and get on with living and giving voice to the long forgotten garden into we all need to till to remember who we are?

Language names things/people/situations and therefore legitimates them. Identity needs words, it needs to be named, and doing so creates visibility in the face of invisibility. Trans folks needed new words, new ways of speaking and making sense of truths. It is a freedom, a breaking of bonds, a celebration of individuality and interconnectedness.

New pronouns and terms for identity invite us all to see and hear and live in ways we have not yet. It opens new landscapes to be planted with new seeds of wonder.

Who are we? What are we? Can we learn to name this ecology with words that are fertilized by those who have the courage to say- I am not one of your named boxes. I am not male or female or I am male or female or I am trans male and female! And I am not only living

between your commas and barb wire fences and walls, I am declaring that what defines me can only be with new words and new grammar.

They/them/their; ey/em/eirs; ze/zir/zers. What happens when we hear these pronouns? Too much we say. I do not care what your pronoun is, we say. Just tell me who you are. What if herself is zerself? What if he is ze? What if these words are built, not to befuddle but to allow expression of a calling that is not contained in herself and he? What if these words are fruits from a garden we are too contained to recognize? The place where we can play, experiment, dance, give of ourselves our eirselves and know the mystery, the inherent dignity, a possibility of identity and expression that allows us all to be whole in ways we did not think possible?

What if trans people, language and expression are part of an ecology that we have barbed wired ourselves from, built walls against in ourselves that contains a key to living into the promise we make to ourselves and one another to nurture the seeds of peace and compassion?

I met with Ted Anderson the other day and told him about our genderqueer class and this reflection. He asked me to follow him into his library to find a book he wanted me to read. I unfolded the ladder he keeps for this purpose and climbed up and scanned the many, extraordinary books that line the shelves of Ted's library.

Volumes of history and archeology and theology made me wish to sit right there and read and read until my eyes stung with the delicious whirling of words.

I found the book Ted was looking for after a time of marveling. The cover was faded, the pages browned and it smelled of time. I presented the found text to a delighted Ted. It is called Sweet's Anglo Saxton Primer, first published in 1882. Ted opened the book immediately to page 22 and held the book up to me with satisfaction outlining his face. Before me was a list of Anglo-Saxton singular pronouns. Ted knows how to pronounce them all and of course instructed me how do so: *ic, me, min, me; pu, pe, pin, pe*.

The separation of Anglo-Saxon from Middle English is marked by The Battle of Hastings in 1066. The separation of Middle English and the Modern English was the Great Vowel Shift that happened sometime in the 15th century. Modern English words have many different origins, but a majority come from Anglo-Saxon, Old Norman French, and a little Old Norse.

Language is an ecology of interconnectedness. Words change as people, environments and needs change. People, environments and needs are changing now.

In our Genderqueer class, Alex and Mykal have encouraged us to consider spirituality and what it needs to thrive.

I call this an ecology of spirituality or an environment that welcomes new vocabulary and exchange of ideas that creates meanings that clear away the bramble of what has to be, and that encourages a more courageous relationship with ourselves and others in which we can

be surprised, broken open and repaired by love. Spiritual practice builds meaning in and around us that creates an ability to meet people where they are and engage in the free exchange of identities, the open air market where the only currency needed is open hearted presence.

From The US Transgender Survey of 2015 that I mentioned earlier, 63% of trans people named themselves as spiritual or religious. Alex and Mykal told us that they have had to map existences with painstaking clarity and commitment. They have had to make and affirm meanings that dominant culture denies. They have learned what spiritual identity calls us all to: an inventory of self and our relationship to the world around us.

We are “ecologies within ecologies.”² We grow and nurture and tend and are grown, nurtured and tended. Spiritual practice affirms the self while challenging self, breaking and restoring self, and creating while being created by, an ecologically sustainable relationship to others.

We are called to open our hearts and minds wider, to question, to play, and to know boundaries too. Boundaries like a grape arbor over the entrance to a garden, that invites in and define as it grows and bends rather than breaking in the wind and offers fruits that can be made into new meanings, new elixirs, new ways of becoming one people on one land, sharing one ecology.

The harvest of practicing beloved community is not measured in the weight of the produce, but about the way we nurture our flowering, fertilizing the earth with love so that all might taste the sweetness of acceptance.

Amen.

² Nora Bateson, Small Arcs of Larger Circles (England, Triarchy Press: 2018), 23.