

The Politics of Identity
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June 26, 16

A nun who was living in a convent next to a construction site noticed the coarse language of the workers and decided to spend some time with them to correct their ways. She decided she would take her lunch, sit with the workers and talk with them. She put her sandwich in a brown bag and walked over to the spot where the men were eating. She walked up to the group and with a big smile said: "and do you men know Jesus Christ?" they shook their heads and looked at each other very confused.

One of the workers looked up into the steelworks and yelled out, "Anybody up there know Jesus Christ?" One of the steelworkers yelled down 'why'? The worker yelled back, "Cos his wife's here with his lunch."

As we look at identity today, and how identity is constructed or created by literature, culture, society, education and our media, we will also be considering how identity is tied to politics. The word political is from the Greek politikos, "of, for, or relating to citizens" it is the process of making uniform decisions applying to all members of a group. It also involves the use of power by some persons to affect the behavior of other persons.

Race is political. Religion is political. Sex and sexual orientation is political. Poverty is political. Gender is political. These categories are constructed or created by culture and then used to keep us behaving as if they are true and that we and everyone not only should live by these norms but that these norms are natural.

I remember as a single mother living on welfare and going to the welfare office to collect my welfare checks with my little girl. I was going to university during this time to get my degree in economics.

I would sit at the desk in front of the person in charge of my welfare case. He or she would tell me that getting a Bachelors degree was not an acceptable occupation in the eyes of the government for someone receiving welfare as a single mother. I had to be in a 2 year technical college or working fulltime. I would make myself as small as I could, as demure and as compliant as I could. I needed to feed my child and pay my rent.

So while I was going to school fulltime and working part-time and taking care of my daughter, and because I worked hard and took the privilege of school seriously, I had the highest GPA in the economics department for 2 years running, something that had not been accomplished by a woman in the history of the economics department at my university before. I remember once applying for subsidized

housing called section 8 housing and the renter saying that she did not rent to single mothers because they were lazy and immoral.

Gender is political, poverty is political.

Religion is political too. I recently had the great privilege of accompanying Laura Qureshi and one of her Muslim friends from this island to the Interfaith Council. I invited them to join me there to introduce them to the Interfaith Council, to let the council know that we will be having a Muslim prayer group here at the Meeting House once a week as of July 1st.

Someone in the Council asked if we knew how many Muslims there are on island. The friend Laura brought is a Nantucketer and lives here fulltime. She was wearing a hijab, the head scarf. She told us that every day she wakes up and wonders if she should put on her head scarf. She told us that many times it feels like she is taking her life in her hands, that she is risking being murdered, like now after what just happened in Orlando and all the dangerous anti-Muslim hate that Donald Trump and other are speaking. She said that she has made the decision that living her faith out loud is worth that risk to her. That she is proud to be a Muslim and if that is the risk, then so be it. She said some of her other friends make different decisions and so we as Nantucketers who are wondering how many Muslims there are on island will not know through this visual sign of the head scarf.

Religion is political. Gender is political.

I have thought often of the social construction of gender in our current presidential campaign, specifically reactions to Hillary Clinton.

On his Sunday morning talk show from Oct. 2007, Chris Matthews raised questions about the real Hillary Clinton. Matthews asserted, "Nobody really seems to have a fix on Hillary, who she is. We know she's sixty years old. But we don't know her happiness level in her personal life."¹

From 1995-1999 the press portrayed Clinton in ways "resonant with the ideology of authentic womanhood."² She stayed with Bill Clinton after his public affair with Monica Lewinski because she was supporting her man, putting the country's needs before her own, focusing on the programs that she had championing up to that point, issues affecting women and children at home and abroad. In short, she was framed as a national mother who had been scorned by her husband but was doing right by her people, a truly authentic woman.³

¹ Shawn J. Parry-Gilles, Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 96.

² Ibid, 97.

³ Ibid.

Bill Clinton was held less responsible for his marital indiscretions than the women in his life: Hillary Clinton for traveling too much and leaving him alone too often, Monica Lewinsky for preying on the sexually susceptible president; and Bill Clinton's mother and grandmother for failing to offer the stable and nurturing environment he needed to thrive as a child....(this all) further substantiated the traditional ideologies of authentic manhood. This cultural logic implied that the patriarchy of the presidency had been (kept intact).⁴

When Hillary decided to stand by her man and to run for the US Senate, resuming her work as a feminist with considerable political ambition, the press and the public reverted their stand on her. No longer was she an authentic woman. Now she was a political animal and her marriage a political marriage.⁵ Now her authenticity as a woman was called into question.

A campaign was begun by Hillary Clinton's advocates to paint her as likeable to the media and public which included the peddling of images and words like softer, kinder, gentler, more graceful, "to recognize the Hillary Clinton that other people see" as Ann Compton of ABC news said.⁶

Somehow now Bill Clinton's affair has become a test of Hillary's honesty and authenticity in her presidential campaigning? Trump says she's co-dependent. Somehow she is not a "real woman." She is a failed woman. She is a good woman no more.

Chris Matthews in 2008 said, "We're never really sure who Hillary is, unvarnished, hair down, one of the boys, one of the girls...just what she's like as a person because she's been in public life since she's been about 28 or something."⁷ Although other major political contenders of the 2008 presidential race, specifically Barack Obama and John McCain, had been in public life for a large majority of their careers, they have no authenticity issues.⁸

It is women who are expected to be authentic when that means vulnerable, available, open, readable, warm, graceful, strong enough but not so strong that others cannot believe themselves dominant.

Gender is constructed and then made political.

My last example is the politics of sex. I recently read this story about a young man named David. David writes:

⁴ Ibid, 99.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 101.

⁷ Ibid, 133.

⁸ Ibid.

I'm not sure exactly when I realized I was gay. It's not as if you're an official homosexual, here's your certificate. Everyone's 'coming out' experiences are different.

“My name is David, I am now 15. Being gay has been one of the most difficult experiences of my life so far. It was hard to come to terms with, something I have had to do completely by myself.

It has been a very lonely process; at times I've felt like everyone is against me. I've felt isolated, I sometimes don't know how to deal with things. I tried to talk to my teacher about the bullying but she just didn't want to know.

She said I should talk to my parents about it but they are both very religious, there was no way I could talk to them about it. It is an agonizing feeling so alone, it's no surprise I sometimes hurt myself.

Once at school this guy was bullying me, the usual stuff; faggot, queer... the teacher didn't do anything. I can't wait until next year when I'll be out of this place. I just can't talk to anyone. I feel insecure and unprotected.”⁹

Since the shootings in Orlando, where 49 young, mostly Latino gay men were murdered, many people who are gay, who have reported long before Orlando feeling living under the real or imminent threat of surveillance, attack, or harassment are now more on guard, waiting for the next onslaught, wondering where this increase in hate is coming from, how to get at it, how to stop it, how to protect themselves and loved ones.

These boxes are put around us and we are all expected to perform within them: men, women, straight, gay, poor, religious, the list goes on and on. And we all use some of these boxes some of the time to keep each other still, fixed, in a place where we can find each other, hold each other, keep each other captured.

And we have to learn how to let this go because it is literally killing us. Not only is it the root of violence, it is the root of fear and anxiety and sorrow and loneliness. We have to learn to breathe, to allow those that are not us more room to breathe, to grow, to surprise us, to be what we are not, to live on their own terms, to live outside of the boxes made for them so well that we forget they were made in a power dynamic for a reason. They did not come with birth.

And the only way from here to there is to recognize that we are responsible for our judgments of others, all others. We are responsible for our judgments of Muslims, of gay people, of women, of men, of people who are poor, of immigrants, of all those set up to be other.

⁹ <http://lgbt.foundation/information-advice/hate-crime/personal-stories>

So as we read the diatribes of those who insist we arm ourselves to the teeth, that we ban the entry of those who are seeking asylum here, that we take citizens of our country who have helped build this country and have as much right to be here any one else, as we make judgments of gender or race or sexual orientation: I ask us to pause and consider: all of that belongs to us and is ours to manage, to educate ourselves from reacting to, to train ourselves from speaking from.

We can begin by making associations with people who are not like us, who come from other walks of life, by walking outside of the paths we usually frequent so that we might learn what it might feel like to be other.

I close with the words of Mark Nepo, a poet and philosopher best known for his book, *The Book of Awakening*. He wrote this after the recent massacre in Orlando:

“When I dare to listen, not knowing what I will hear, the things that parade between us evaporate and it’s just us, breathing the same air. At times like this, I’m reminded that no one knows what being alive is like or where this life will lead, and that any sense of what’s normal is just an illusion.

The courage we need worldwide is the resolve to be truthful and vulnerable about our existence; no matter how different our experience may seem. When we encounter difference, we need to resist the fear that wants to make everything we meet just like us. Such sameness is crippling. Instead, we need to open our histories and listen, so we can be made whole by the parts of life that we are lacking.

Today, being a global citizen requires the courage to stay truthful about our existence and the courage to be touched and shaped by the faces of humanity we meet and help along the way.”

May it be so. Amen.