

Cisgender and Transgender

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I suspect most of you are more familiar with the term transgender than with the term cisgender. The term transgender came first, adding the Latin prefix “*trans-*” (meaning, “across from” or “on the other side of”) to the word gender to indicate a person, whose gender identity or gender expression does not match their biological sex. *Cisgender* was coined as a complementary term from the Latin prefix *cis-*, (meaning “on this side of”), indicating a person, whose gender identity and gender expression for the most part match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Speaking for myself, owning the label cisgender helps me resist the all too common perception that transgender folk are deviant from an alleged “norm” instead of seeing both cisgender *and* transgender as two (among many) legitimate points on a wide spectrum than spans the diverse human condition.

Along these lines, regarding the limitations of even the growing acronym L.G.B.T.Q.I.A. (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Ally), one freshman at Columbia University was quoted in a *New York York Times* [article](#) that:

We have our lesbians, our gays, bisexual, transsexual, queer, homosexual, asexual, pansexual, omnisexual, trisexual, agender, bi-gender, third gender, transgender, transvestite, intersexual, Two-spirit, [Hijra](#), polyamorous, undecided, questioning, other, human.

And as part of coming to see all those labels as various places where we *human beings* can find ourselves in all our gender and sexual diversity, I invite you to take a look at the insert to your Order of Service labeled “[The Genderbread Person](#).” This chart is a playful attempt used in a recent UU “[Transgender Inclusion](#)” [webinar](#) to visualize how the various spectrums interrelate regarding Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Biological Sex, and Sexual Attraction. Notice, first that **these four**

different attributes are each on a different and non-intersecting spectrum, and can thus manifest themselves in many diverse varieties in various individuals.

Gender Identity is in your *mind*: inside your head, do you think of yourself as more of a woman or man?

Gender Expression is how you appear *externally*. In your clothes and behavior, do you present yourself to others as more masculine or more feminine, androgynous or gender neutral?

The third category, **attraction**, is in your *heart*: are you sexually attracted to men/males/masculinity, women/females/femininity, both, or neither?

Finally, there is a spectrum regarding **Biological Sex**. As mentioned earlier, transgender individuals identify as male or female in a way that differs from what is assigned to them by biological science. And intersexuals have chromosomal genotypes and sexual phenotypes other than a simple XY-male and XX-female. According to the [Intersex Society of North America](#), “If you ask experts at medical centers how often a child is born so noticeably atypical in terms of genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in, the number comes out to about 1-in-1500 to 1-in-2000 births. But a lot more people than that are born with subtler forms of sex anatomy variations, some of which won’t show up until later in life.”

As a more concrete example of why all of this matters deeply, some of you may recall that at this summer’s annual UU General Assembly (which was in Louisville this past June), a decision was made to be more welcoming to transgender and/or gender non-conforming people by having many multi-stall bathrooms designated as *Gender Neutral*.

And in the orientation email sent out in advance to all GA participants, perhaps the most important part was the note that, **“In all restrooms we ask you to trust that individuals know which restroom is most comfortable and appropriate for them.”** Having used quite a few of those Gender Neutral restrooms while in Louisville, I assure you it turns out that “Gender Neutral” bathrooms are pretty much just bathrooms. In contrast, as the signs posted in the Gender Neutral bathrooms highlighted, *Gender-specific* bathrooms (which are ubiquitous in our society) can be incredibly

dangerous spaces for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals: “the use of public restrooms can come with emotional and physical harassment, deep discomfort, risk of arrest for being in the ‘wrong’ bathroom or even physical violence and death.”

The important noticing here is that *more* is needed that simply an increased openness on the individual level, although that is a vital starting point. Changes are also needed in how we structure our society. Relatedly, even as we celebrated some breathtaking victories for social justice this past year in Maryland — The Maryland Offshore Wind Energy Act of 2013, The Firearm Safety Act of 2013, and the Death Penalty Repeal - Substitution of Life Without the Possibility of Parole, as well as victories for the DREAM Act and Same-Sex Marriage — even as we rightly celebrate those important victories, it is vital to remember that **The Fairness for All Marylanders Act of 2013 lost by a 5-6 vote**, stalling it in committee. That bill would have ensured “basic rights to transgender Marylanders, including the right to be free from discrimination in their jobs, homes, credit and places of public accommodations.” As UUs our First Principle commits us to the “Inherent worth and dignity of everyone person,” and to me a natural outflowing of that commitment should lead us to partner with organizations such as the Maryland Coalition for Trans Equality (<http://mdtransequality.org/>), which is working to help that bill pass during the 2014 General Assembly Session. Members of this congregation did help with that work this past year, but further advocacy is needed to increase the likelihood for passage this year.

I should also note that this past Friday, October 11 was National Coming Out Day, which celebrates our LGBTQIA friends, family members, and neighbors who have “braved fears of discrimination, rejection, hatred, and violence to lead open lives of authenticity.” In that spirit, I am grateful to Laura Cromwell, a member of our congregation, for her willingness to speak to us this morning. She has graciously agreed to share some about her growing gender awareness, her process of coming out, some of where she is today, and some suggestions for how those of us who are cisgender can be better allies to our friends, family, neighbors, and fellow citizens who are transgender.

Chalice Extinguishing

As we extinguish our chalice, I would like to leave you with a few thoughts inspired by a book I read recently by Leslie Feinberg titled, *TransLiberation: Beyond Pink and Blue*:

The truth that *gender is a spectrum* that doesn't always match the biological sex one is assigned at birth is a truth that is as clear to me as every little boy I've met who was ever teased for being a sissy or every little girl I've have met who has ever been derisively called a tomboy.

The need for *greater gender freedom* in our society is, likewise, as clear to me as the need to create a world in which no child is every again made fun of for their natural gender expression — whether masculine, feminine, both, or somewhere in between.

That such a *gender liberated world* is possible is as clear to me as the fact that we already live in a world in which the “race box” is optional on many forms. The trans-liberation movement challenges us that the “gender box” (and the gender lens through which we are taught to see the world) should also be optional, eliminated, or divided into many more options.

May we be part of creating a world in which *masculine and feminine* are as interchangeable in regard to one's biology as the choice of whether to speak Spanish, English, or a combination of the two — or, as my bi-cultural childhood friends from Miami used to say: *Spanglish*.¹

Other Resources

- **The 7 Questions Project:** <http://wehappytrans.com/qa/7-questions-stephen/>
- **Tomboy:** a 2011 French film with incredible child acting: “Uncomfortable living as a girl, 10-year-old Laure decides to spend her childhood as Michael. When Michael's family moves to rural France, the child wins friends and comes to understand the complexities of gender.”
- **Transgender 101:** <http://www.uua.org/lgbtq/identity/25348.shtml>

¹ I composed the Chalice Extinguishing immediately after finishing Feinberg's book. After writing, I went back through the book, and clearly the Chalice Extinguishing is inspired by and adapts ideas directly from at least the following pages: 9, 15, 21, 32-33, 46, 48.

- **PBS NOVA special on “The Intersex Spectrum”:** <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/intersex-spectrum.html>.
- **Abigail Tarttlin, *Golden Boy: A Novel*:**

The Walker family is good at keeping secrets from the world. They are even better at keeping them from each other. Max Walker is a golden boy. Attractive, intelligent, and athletic, he’s the perfect son, the perfect friend, and the perfect crush for the girls in his school. He’s even really nice to his little brother. Karen, Max’s mother, is a highly successful criminal lawyer, determined to maintain the façade of effortless excellence she has constructed through the years. Now that the boys are getting older, now that she won’t have as much control, she worries that the façade might soon begin to crumble. Adding to the tension, her husband, Steve, has chosen this moment to stand for election to Parliament. The spotlight of the media is about to encircle their lives. The Walkers are hiding something, you see. Max is special. Max is different. Max is intersex. When an enigmatic childhood friend named Hunter steps out of his past and abuses his trust in the worst possible way, Max is forced to consider the nature of his well-kept secret....