

ways and likewise, express ourselves certain ways. Leslie Feinberg writes that she was born female but that her “masculine gender expression is seen as male.”⁹ When Feinberg attempted to dress like a woman s/he appeared to be a man dressing as a woman. We struggle to embrace her essence. We want some kind of clarity that does not exist. S/he is who s/he is (and Feinberg prefers creating and using her own gender neutral pronouns).

The power to name is one of the greatest powers on earth, as is the power to be. As Unitarian Universalists, if there is anything our principles call us to do, it is to accept and embrace variation. To just let people who do not harm others, be, beautiful and precious in their own identity and expression.



The Power to Be: A Sermon in Honor of Rainbow Sunday

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⁹ *Warriors*, 101.

A recent issue of *People Magazine* contained one page that displayed four separate photographs of people with beautiful, long hair. The automatic assumption is that the photographs are women. Turn the page, and they are four men; comedian Russell Brand, Olympian Shaun White, Poison front man, Bret Michaels, and the guitarist from Velvet Revolver, Slash. All are asked about their hair. My favorite statement was from Bret Michaels who indicated that he just likes hair extensions and feels more like himself wearing them.

For those of you not familiar with Bret Michaels, he is a forty-something front man from a glam metal “hair band,” whose career bounced back in the past few years after he appeared on the reality show “Rock of Love.” In that show, dozens of nubile women with questionable manners vie for his attention. He is, in this show, depicted as a male, heterosexual love machine. So I appreciated that Bret Michaels, the Rock of Love, openly discusses hair extensions. He is the first man I have ever seen discuss his hair extensions. I am intrigued, in a world of changing gender identity and gender expression, that a stalwart male stud is happy to discuss hair extensions, long seen as a salon procedure for women.

This comes on the heels of a Head and Shoulders shampoo commercial featuring Troy Polamalu, a safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers known for his heavy hitting. Mr. Polamalu is a big, tough man, who has long black hair that falls in cascades of wavy ringlets. He has the kind of hair so beautiful that people stare. It is the kind of hair usually found on women.

gender identity; rather than their biological sex. The term “transgender” does not provide information about a person’s sexual orientation; transgender people can be bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual or asexual.⁸

Given this definition Bret Michaels is transgender for using hair extensions and Troy Polamalu is transgender for flaunting his hair. Depending on your gender ideas, you might perceive me as transgender because I wear pants. A thirty year old man who wears eye-makeup is transgender. A woman in men’s clothing is transgender. Leslie Feinberg is transgender. However, this tells us nothing about anyone’s sexual orientation. We can be bi-sexual, asexual, heterosexual, or homosexual.

I think that transgendered people appear so different to us because society has unnecessarily strong expectations around gender identity and gender expression. People are who they are. We as a society, through intimidation, discrimination, and violence just don’t let people be who they are. It is a terrible waste, loss, and act of violence.

It’s not possible to make someone heterosexual or homosexual, which is a fear that some people share. The joke from the 1990’s was that every woman who became a lesbian would receive a toaster. It was a joke. There is no possible recruitment for sexual orientation. We are who we are. We are born certain

⁸ “Time to Seek,” 8.

A Time to Seek curriculum defines intersexual as

An individual who has atypical development of physical sex attributes, including (but not limited to) external genitals that are not easily classified as male or female, incomplete development of internal reproductive organs, variations of the sex chromosomes, etc. . . . Approximately one in 1,500 to one in 2,000 infants are born every year with external genitals that are not easily identified as male or female.⁷

Born this way. Brought into the world this way. Given our UU principles I want any inter-sexed child born into our congregation to be embraced. Same for any member or visitor who is inter-sexed. From my theological point of view, I look at all humans created in God's image. I think God has a wonderful imagination and a profound eye for the diversity of beauty.

Here is another definition from *A Time to Seek* that will be helpful, "transgender". Transgender is

An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the cultural expectations of their biological sex. Transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their

In this commercial, Polamalu is approached by a sportscaster, named Trent, who wants to talk about his work in the game. Polamalu keeps returning to the topic of his hair and how beautiful it is due to his use of Head and Shoulders. Finally, in frustration "Trent" says "I didn't ask about your hair." Polamalu replies "You asked with your eyes" and then walks away, but not before we hear him give Trent the ubiquitous football butt slap. This commercial, used by a major advertiser, and aired during the Super Bowl is all about gender identity and gender expression, and how it is changing all around us. Men get hair extensions. Men wear their hair long. Girls wear tuxedos to their school proms. Schools are changing dress codes so that neither girls nor boys wear heels too high or skirts too short.

Something major is shifting in the Western world of gender identity and expression. Something that Leslie Feinberg could never have imagined growing up in the 1950's in a Midwestern town that frowned on girls who wore "boy's clothes" too long. There is still neither safety nor equality for those who claim a gender identity or expression that does not match cultural assumptions about their biological sex. But that we can have a successful Super Bowl commercial about a football player's lustrous hair indicates that we are beginning to accept the gender and sexual diversity within our world, and I can only thank Mr. Polamalu and Mr. Michaels for loving their hair and letting us know all about it.

⁷ *A Time to Seek*, (2007), 13.

I was inspired to write this sermon for several reasons. First, several years ago I attended seminary with someone who described herself as “inter-sexed (which I will define later).” I had never heard that term before, was not completely clear what it meant, and so embarked on several years of personal education that included lectures by sexuality educators and personal reading, including books such as the Pulitzer Prize winning book *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. Second, the UUA has sponsored a successful campaign entitled “Standing on the Side of Love” this past year and has encouraged clergy to step out on issues of discrimination where we as a country have not stood on the side of love. I have been inspired by the director of the campaign, Adam Gerhardstein, who was a high school student at this church when I arrived in Cincinnati. I am grateful to his ministry to me and our association. Finally, gender identity and gender expression were not things we really talked about even twenty years ago. They hadn’t trickled down to the mainstream like they have today. Variations in gender identity and expression have been with us since civilization began, but we are just beginning to live into our variation. My prediction is that this will only increase as years go by, and it will be a great thing.

Gender identity and expression is not something many of us know about in great detail, so let me share some definitions from “A Time to Seek: [a] Study Guide on Sexual and Gender Diversity” published by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and

When we see or meet someone who appears to be “gender variant” we often assume we have the right (because we are uncertain) to ask questions: Are you male or female? Why do you dress that way? We don’t have the right to ask these questions to someone with whom we do not have a close relationship. We don’t have to share with anyone how old we are, if we wear a wig, if we have a colostomy, or false teeth. I don’t see why anyone should be asked about their gender or gender expression. I know it is confusing, we still don’t get to ask, unless it is a matter of relevant and important etiquette (you want to correctly and politely introduce someone) or a related medical emergency and you are providing medical assistance. If you ever find yourself with gender variance you do not understand, may I suggest you politely observe and appreciate the difference, no questions asked, while treating that person as you would every other special, precious human being.

I never asked my colleague about her gender expression or identity. She had a feminine name and voice and a beard. Obviously, that didn’t match my ideas about gender identity, but out of respect for her I kept my thoughts to myself. She was, also one of the most thoughtful people I knew. One day, while we were talking she told me that she is inter-sexed. She was the first person who explained to me that some babies are born without a definitive gender; they have qualities of both genders. This gave me a lot to think about. For Bret Michaels and millions of other women it is a matter of choosing hair extensions. Some people are born inter-sexed.

difficult or attention seeking. My guess is that anyone who is willing to face the fear and discrimination that will come with appearing gender variant, must feel that in order to be him or herself, he or she must dress in this way.

One woman noted

I am a black, butch lesbian who wears men's clothing. It is often difficult for me to exist in this manner that is so natural for me. You see, many people in the world (or, at least, the Western world) don't like certain qualities in people. Hence, these individuals do not like me because I am (in no particular order) 1) a woman, 2) Black, 3) a lesbian, 4) butch. A fifth point of disgust, according to these folks, is that I wear men's clothing, which no woman is supposed to do. But I like myself. I did not in the past.⁶

Note her sentence "this manner which is so natural for me." She dresses how she feels real, true, whole. It might scare some people, but she is breaking no laws. She is doing nothing wrong. She is being true to herself, and as people who respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must embrace her and her choices without question. We must also protect them.

⁶ *Warriors*, 148.

Healing.¹ According to this guide, which is an adult education curriculum, gender identity is "an individual's own sense of self as a woman, man, or transgender. Gender identity may or may not conform to an individual's biological sex."² So, someone may be "sex assigned" as male, but have female qualities, or feel more like a female, or just like wearing hair extensions, or any combination thereof.

Gender expression is "the outward expression (behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, and/or body characteristics) of an individual's gender. The gender expression of Brett Michael's hair is feminine. His gender identity is masculine."³

Gender identity and gender expression are a new playing field for teenagers and young adults, and I believe, will continue to be a factor in challenging notions of sexual orientation and gender identity, for which I am deeply grateful. A recent *New York Times* article, "Can a Boy Wear a Skirt to School," noted that school administrators are dealing with changes in gender identity and expression. The article explains

Dress code conflicts often reflect a generational divide, with students coming of age in a culture that is more accepting of ambiguity and difference than that of the adults who make the rules. "This generation is

¹ Timothy Palmer and Reverend Debra W. Haffner, "A Time to Seek: Study Guide on Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2007.

² "A Time to Seek," 8.

³ *Ibid.*

really challenging the gender norms we grew up with,” said Diane Ehrensaft, an Oakland psychologist who writes about gender. “A lot of youths say they will not be bound by boys having to wear this or girls wearing that. For them gender is a creative playing field.”⁴

The article notes that the “emo” fashion style, which features men who wear black eye make-up has crossed into the mainstream, so that men of all sexual orientations wear are wearing black eye make-up. Gender identity and gender expression are becoming less likely to indicate a person’s sexual orientation, which those of us used to the old norms find confusing.

The article goes on to note that school administrators must also weigh their decisions in the light of possible discrimination charges (you would let a girl wear a skirt to school but not a boy – why?). If John’s skirt is an appropriate length what dress code or school policy has he violated? If Tracy wears a tuxedo for her class prom what dress code or school policy has she violated? Very likely, none. Consider, that a school administrator who sent a child home because he/she was not wearing close of his or her “gender” could subject the school to a potential lawsuit.

On the other hand, school administrators must also consider the safety of students. People who appear gender variant are more exposed to violence.

⁴ Jan Hoffman, “Can a Boy Wear a Skirt to School?” *The New York Times* (November 8, 2009).

Perceived “difference” stirs up fear which can lead to violence. Many of you will remember the Oscar winning 1999 film, *Boys Don’t Cry*, based on the true story of Brandon Teena who was brutally assaulted, beaten, and then murdered for his gender non-conformity. As people we fear what we don’t understand. We also fear variation, though variation is within us and among us, always has been, and always will be. As one man noted

Trying to envision masculine at one end of a line and feminine on the other, with the rest of us somewhere on that line is a difficult concept for me to grasp . . . I believe that if all of us weren’t so afraid of saying, “Yes, I’m a man, and I also knit,” if we weren’t so terrified of what the repercussions would be – we would find out that we are all a little gender variant.⁵

Restrooms can become dangerous places of violence and discrimination for those who “appear” different. This is one of the reasons we at First Church created extra publicity for our individual restrooms on the second floor. If someone wanted restroom privacy for any reason, it can be found here. And we must also make room for people with gender variance within our male and female restrooms.

Too often we look at people who appear gender variant (to us) and the assumption is they are being

⁵ Sky Renfro quoted in *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, by Leslie Feinberg (1996), 151.