

STRETCHING OUR UNDERSTANDING: the challenges of sexuality  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Nov. 14, 2004

A story from my past: my friend Stephanie and I (both of us single women and looking) had been intrigued by Harold for weeks, and at our annual Fall church retreat one year, our curiosity reached its peak.

Harold was a slender, good-looking fellow about our age, recently divorced, friendly, talented--he played the flute like a wizard--cute little bald spot. We could sense that he was more interested in friendship than romance, and that was fine. But there was something mysterious about Harold and we didn't know what it might be.

At our closing worship service on Sunday morning, high in the aspen-gold of the Rockies, Harold looked different. His nails were beautifully shaped and polished, he was wearing softly rounded glasses instead of his normal squarish frames, and the eyes highlighted by this new frame were carefully made up-----pale blue eye shadow, mascara, and a touch of eyeliner.

It struck both of us that Harold was communicating something unusual and important. And so, hesitantly, we asked him if he would tell us about his new look. We could see him take a deep breath, consider whether or not he was brave enough to do this, and agree to tell us what was going on. Let me read you something he wrote to me later:

*When I was just three years old, I had an incredibly startling thought. It was one of those things like remembering where you were or what you were doing when you heard President Kennedy had been shot, or the first Apollo mission landing....*

*Then, as with these other events, I took a mental picture of not only the thought and my surroundings, but also of my feelings. My thought was that I should have been a girl! It is almost my oldest preserved memory.*

*But how is it possible that a three year old should have such a thought? I knew nothing of sex back then. Oh sure. I knew there were boys and girls and brothers and sisters, and of course, mothers and fathers. But of sex? Nothing.*

*I'm told by others that I was a rather precocious little kid even at that age, and I was eagerly drinking in all that was in my surrounding world, but something didn't really make sense to me, and that was, well--me. Everyone had...told me I was a boy and I really didn't have any reason to doubt that it was true.*

*But there were these continual niggling little conflicts in my feelings and with the other kids. It sounds terribly formulaic now but I didn't like playing with other boys my age. They were too rough and wanted everything! I liked the girls though because they shared and didn't hit--at least not back then.*

*And so that radical thought intruded that April afternoon in 1947 while I watched my mother iron our clothes as the Nebraska spring breeze gently blew in the white lace window curtains. My first urge was to blurt out this thought to Mom but something stopped me.*

*Why? I don't really know, but somehow inside at some level, I knew that this important "news" wouldn't be greeted warmly, and I kept it to myself as a dense hard knot in my heart then, and for the next forty plus years.*

The rest of the story Harold told us was unlike anything I had ever heard before. I had never known a male who felt he should have been born a female, a man who felt that his genitals were the wrong kind, a man who was so clear that he was really female that he was willing to undergo the emotionally-strenuous and medically-painful process to live legally as a woman the rest of his life.

Since that time, I have been privileged to walk with Harold on his journey into femaleness, learning to call him “her”, learning to overcome my fear and uneasiness about this monumental change from Harold to Carol. Carol became a close friend, during those years in Colorado.

We got to the point where we could joke about the old days, when the estrogen she was taking and the rigors of her journey caused her to be so sensitive that if I slipped and said “Harold” or referred to her as “he”, she was wounded for days.

We learned to laugh about the efforts of the women at Jefferson Unitarian Church to teach her how to walk like a woman, how to style her hair, how to wear her new clothes. We talked for hours about the social aspects of femaleness and maleness, how conditioned we are about our gender expectations, how hard it is for people to change their expectations around gender.

Carol lost her job when she began the requisite two years of living as a woman, in order to qualify for the surgery to transform her male body into a female body. She had been a well-respected geophysicist with the US Geological Survey in Denver; that bastion of “real men” was unprepared for the conflicts they experienced around her sex change.

Though some were sympathetic and understanding, most were not, and Carol lost her job because the tension and hostility around her were unendurable and she slipped into a serious clinical depression, causing her to miss weeks of work.

There was no precedent for gender identity harassment and she had no recourse through the courts. There were times early in her journey when Carol's depression was so great that she considered suicide, times when she felt completely friendless and helpless to change that, times when she had no hope that she would ever feel better, even though she never wavered in her desire to live as a female.

But Carol found an unexpected resource or two. Early in her journey, she had found our church, Jefferson Unitarian in Golden, CO. She began to visit as a male and found an open and welcoming environment, a place where she felt safe enough to reveal her struggle and seek help and friendship.

She also had her family. Though she began divorce proceedings when she began her journey, and though her ex-wife was still angry and grief-stricken over her decision to become female, her children did not quit loving her. They struggled with the issues of how to introduce her to friends, how to think of her---as Mom? or Dad?---how to feel about her new look and her new troubles.

By chance, I happened to be a guidance counselor at the junior high school where Carol's son was a ninth grader. This too was a resource, as I was able to reach out to him and able to offer help to members of a family in turmoil.

Being able to offer help gave me a perspective from which to deal with my own fear and ignorance. Others' needs became more important than mine and I found this to be helpful in getting past my discomfort.

During Carol's transition, all was not sweetness and light at our church, however. Some members of the congregation questioned whether or not we should be so welcoming to her. What were we supposed to say to our children? What if we became a congregation known as the transgender congregation? Our Committee on Ministry tackled the issue of Carol vs. Harold several times in that first year.

It was particularly hard for one man who, when Carol brought her new male friend to church and sat holding hands with him in the pew, asked the COM to tell her to cut that out, that he didn't want to see PDA's or public displays of affection in church!

Gradually, we got past all that. Carol became an accepted and skilled leader in the congregation, open about her story, open to questions, not shy about advocating for social justice for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and her transgender friends who began to come to church.

And yes, JUC did become known as a safe place for transgender people. Carol brought friends from the Gender Identity Center in Denver where she was a participant: Roxanne, Sarah, Robynne, to name a few, all human beings who did not fit common male/female gender expectations, people living between the edges of sexual identity, people struggling to live openly in a society that wishes they were easier to define.

During the recent election, we saw a number of punitive laws about gender winning the popular vote in several states, including in Oregon our sister state.

The laws approved by voters in these 11 states weigh heavily on the minds and hearts of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folk, as they attack a foundational piece of human identity, gender and sexuality.

Gender and sexual preference are clearly scary topics for many Americans. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual love has become a little better understood, though no less frightening for those who oppose homosexuality on so-called religious grounds.

But transgender issues are even more frightening for many. Some of the questions that go through our minds are pretty scary: what would it be like to be a girl living in a boy's body? or a boy living in a girl's body? what would it be like to feel both male and female, to have people wonder if you were male or female? what would it be like to try to explain to people who you are, where you are on the gender continuum?

Where would you go to the bathroom? what would you check on your driver's license, male or female? are you gay or lesbian if you are transgender and love women? or love men? what kind of treatment could you expect from the authorities if you were arrested or injured or needed help?

We are accustomed to thinking in only two gender categories, male and female. We have stretched enough to acknowledge that many males are sexually attracted to other males, that many females are sexually attracted to other females, and though this may be uncomfortable for some, most of us UU's have come to accept same-sex love as normal, as worthy of celebration and honor.

But where are we when it comes to intersexual people, people who do not fit the so-called "normal" either-or equation?

My East Coast colleague, the Rev. Lindsay Allison, (not his real name) is an intersexual person. Tall and strong, Lindsay has long, flowing wavy red hair. From the rear s/he looks like a handsome, stylish woman. Lindsay also has a neatly trimmed, full red beard. From the front, s/he looks like a handsome, longhaired man. Who is Lindsay?

Lindsay is articulate, smart, funny, dedicated, well-liked by his colleagues. But s/he's had a hard time finding the right parish for his ministry. You may have noticed that I'm using intersexual pronouns. S/he, not he or she; his, not his or her. Because Lindsay was born both male and female, not one or the other. And his parents did not yield to the medical suggestion that their child be surgically sexually assigned at birth, because this decision is often not in the best interests of the child.

What kinds of challenges does this present for a person? for a religious community? What do we believe in? What are we willing to do?

Last month, a group of us spent several hours with the Rev. Keith Kron of the UUA, discussing what it means to become an official Welcoming Congregation. We examined our own attitudes and our fears, shared our experiences and our hopes, and we expressed the hope that this congregation would undertake this journey, to become informed about the issues, to confront our fears and our stereotypical thinking, and to actively reach out to people whose gender definition or sexual preferences are not the same as “everyone else's”.

This requires a good deal of courage and stamina, because it requires us to rethink our privileged place in society, it requires us to let go of some of that privilege, it requires us to change our behavior, our words, our thoughts. It requires us to have hard conversations---if we are open to free sexual expression for all, where do we draw the lines to protect children? what does it mean to protect children? does it mean we keep them from exploring their own sexual identity? does it mean we try to keep them “straight”? what are we protecting them from?

These are tough questions and though we may think we have the answers now, we may find that we don't, that new questions arise, that new understandings challenge us to change our answers.

What does it mean that we will begin this journey together? What will our new knowledge require of us?

Just like straight, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, transgender and intersex people have been around for a long time. Among indigenous peoples, both in the Americas and on other continents, a person who was both male and female was honored, given special responsibilities.

Among Native Americans, the term used for these special people was “Two-Spirit”. Though honored by their own people, Two-Spirits were often victimized by those who invaded their lands.

Europeans who came to colonize the Americas were horrified by the acceptance given Two-Spirits. The colonizers’ behavior toward Two Spirits was cruel and punishing. When the Spaniards invaded the Antilles and Louisiana, and I quote, “they found men dressed as women who were respected by their societies. Thinking they were hermaphrodites or homosexuals, they slew them.”

Antonio de la Calancha, a Spanish official in Lima, Peru, wrote that during Vasco Nunez de Balboa’s expedition across Panama, Balboa “saw men dressed like women; Balboa learnt that they were sodomites and threw the king and 40 others to be eaten by his dogs, a fine action of an honorable and Catholic Spaniard.”

One wellknown person who was probably transgender or intersex is Joan of Arc. In 1431, two years after she had led 10,000 peasants in a march to rout the English from France, liberating small towns and villages in her effort to help the exiled Prince Charles regain his throne, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake.

History would like us to think that it was for political reasons; Joan is portrayed in many works of art as an extremely feminine woman. However, according to some research, she was actually put to death by the authorities because she refused to wear women’s clothing, preferring to dress as a man, even unto death.

In every society, transgender and intersex folk have appeared. In some they have been respected and honored. In most Judeo-Christian cultures, however, they have been condemned as outside of the purity code, outside of the realm of proper behavior for good religious people.

We have turned them into jokes, into victims, into caricatures of humanity. In my rural high school, nothing was funnier than when the football team put balloons under their sweaters and paraded as cheerleaders. But let a drag revue come to a neighboring town, and the whole county was up in arms at the idea that men would wear makeup, dress in sexy and revealing gowns, and act like women.

People who are not easily defined are at great risk in our sexually-paranoid society. In Portland a couple of years ago, the badly beaten body of a young transgender person, Loni Okaruru, was found in a ditch. Loni was a male living as a female and may have been killed by someone who was angry to find out that she had male genitals, not female. And a couple of summers ago in Cortez, Colorado, Fred Martinez, a young Navajo Two Spirit, was killed by another teen who beat Fred with a rock and left his body in a canyon near town.

What is our responsibility toward members of the larger community who do not fit the mold? Is there some line we draw, when we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person? As we undertake the work of becoming a Welcoming Congregation, we are committing ourselves to consider hard questions, to make hard changes in our expectations and in our attitudes and behavior, to learn hard lessons about love and justice.

Do we have what it takes to become truly welcoming? Are we willing to be open to the spiritual growth and learning that we invite into our lives as we begin this process? Will we take up the challenge in courage and faith, knowing that it is not easy, not quick, not always fun, but knowing that the rewards are worth every hard moment? In this post-election time of fear and anxiety for all of us, sexual minority persons are feeling particularly concerned. Are we willing to stand up for them and for justice at this difficult time in American history?

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

CLOSING HYM #407, WELCOME TABLE

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that as persons of faith, we have a mission to fulfill. May we look for opportunities to offer strength, hope, and courage to others, and may we find these qualities within ourselves as well. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.