

Reflections on Transgender Issues

You know that the letters LGBT refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. Many within the trans community say that, in LGBT, the T is silent. We certainly hear a lot less about transgender questions, and frankly it is a lot harder to wrap our heads around them. I'm happy to be able to spend a little time with you this morning trying to do just that.

When a child is born – or, these days, when a woman is pregnant – what's the first question people will ask? Is it a boy or a girl? It is that fundamental to our overall sense of a person's identity. Parents usually choose names, clothing, hairstyles that confirm this key part of their child's identity. (Unless they're Frank Zappa and name their child Moon Unit!) What would happen if the parents of a child born biologically male were to name him Emily, dress him in a pink dress, let his hair get long and put bows in it? People would be very confused and also very uncomfortable bending the gender norms.

We have stretched these gender norms such that we encourage girls to wear pants, play hockey, become electricians, and little boys to dance and to play in toy kitchens (we don't give boys the same degree of latitude we give girls, however). So gender - what it means in society to be a man or a woman - has evolved. For most of us, as we grow up, our sense of gender identity matches our biological sex. For example, I have a woman's body and I feel deep inside that I am a woman.

I would invite you for a moment to rest in simple awareness of yourself and your body. Are you a woman with a woman's body? Does this feel deeply right to you? Are you a man with a man's body, and does this feel right to you? Most of the time, nature gets it right and our sense of gender identity matches the body we were born into. Now imagine yourself in a body belonging to the opposite sex. You're probably thinking, "Oh, my gosh – what is that?!" This is how transgender folk feel. They have a profound sense that they were born into the wrong body and that they simply cannot live with integrity trapped inside this body that betrays their sense of who they are. Some trans folk then have the great courage to take steps to make a gender transition so that their body matches their identity.

It takes courage because, if people might look askance at a male baby dressed as female, it can turn violent with adults who make a gender transition, particularly males who transition to female. Indeed, on Good Friday of this year, a transgender woman went into a washroom in a McDonald's in Baltimore. She was attacked as she came out, beaten and kicked viciously in full view of customers and staff, who, I am saddened to say, contented themselves with cheering on the attackers and filming the attack.

I am not an expert in transgender questions. I was a founding member of the Dalhousie Allies program (a sort of gay-straight alliance), and, more importantly in terms of my learning, I am the mother of a transsexual woman; my oldest child was born male and in fact attended St. John's with me for several years – you would have known him as Brendan about ten or twelve years ago. During Brendan's teens, he

became increasingly aware that his identity was female and that he had somehow been issued the wrong body. Brendan began a gender transition eight years ago and is now a very happy and together young woman who chose the name of Misty. I think that I learned more by walking with Misty in her transition to womanhood than in any other area of my life, and I absolutely honor her courage and her integrity.

Let me take a minute or two to clarify a few terms: “Transgender” refers to people whose gender identity differs from their biological sex. Some trans people undergo hormone treatment and surgery so that their bodies conform to their gender identity. Some do not, or undergo partial treatment such as hormones only.

Cross-dressers or transvestites enjoy wearing clothing associated with the opposite gender, but this often has nothing to do with their gender identity. Shakespeare plays and indeed many comedies today are full of cross-dressers. Nineteenth century European literary circles had their share, too: George Sand, the pseudonym of one of my favourite French women writers, famously wore trousers and smoked cigars, defying cultural expectations of women. But her identity as a woman was clear.

Drag queens, many of whom are gay men, enjoy dressing up in a very exaggerated way as glamorous women. This is not the same as transgender. Many aboriginal cultures honour transgender people, whom they call “two-spirited”, honoured because they have insights into two ways of being. Transgender people can be heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual. When I went with my daughter for her gender reassignment surgery in Montreal, I had the privilege of meeting seven other trans folks having surgery that week. There was a couple, both male-to-female transsexuals in a lesbian relationship, there were others in heterosexual relationships and one person who identified as bisexual.

What does this have to do with our life and work as a Christian community?
What are the faith-in-action dimensions of this?

First of all, I would say that a person who embarks on a gender transition epitomizes the Christian story of suffering, death and rebirth. Before making a gender transition, most trans people suffer internally at the dissonance between their identity and their bodies, and many are bullied. When one gender identity is shed in favour of a new one, it is truly a rebirth. (In fact, a few years ago, my daughter gave me a card on Mother’s Day which thanked me for helping her to become the woman she is; as I read it, I looked up at Misty and saw the twinkle in her eye, and we both roared with laughter.)

Our reading from John has something to say to us about welcoming diversity, in my view. We read, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” Another way to read this would be, “There is plenty of room for everyone in this heaven-on-earth we aim to create.” I have never liked the exclusivity that is often read into “No one gets to the Father except through me”, implying that only “good Christians” are acceptable. I prefer to interpret this passage as saying that if we open ourselves to

the Christ spirit (which other traditions name differently), through it we are radically opened to God, and we can and must “make room for everyone” as we work towards heaven on earth.

Before Misty began her transition, she and I both attended St. John’s. She did not feel comfortable coming back after she began her transition – it was just too nerve-wracking. After a time, I decided to transfer my membership to Bedford United, which was at the time the only Affirming Congregation in the city and where I didn’t think I knew anyone; I thought that Misty could simply appear as my daughter, no explanations required. I am glad to have the opportunity to say publicly that this was not because I thought that she would not be welcomed here. I was quite simply in “mother bear” mode, willing to go anywhere and try anything to help her feel safe and comfortable. Being an Affirming Congregation, as St. John’s is now, is a key way for us to say “there is plenty of room for you”. Becoming aware of transgender issues will help us as a congregation if someone from the congregation were to embark on a gender transition in the future. My daughter knew that it was safe for her to talk to her Dad and me about being trans, since we talked quite a bit about LGBT issues and homophobia in the home while the kids were growing up. Someone who works with LGBT youth was actually amazed that Misty had talked to us early on, saying that parents are usually the last to know. I suspect that this is not the case in families – and in congregations - where openness to diversity, and commitment to integrity and human rights are visible values.

The reading from Acts describes the stoning of Stephen. He is given the opportunity to speak before he is stoned, and he recounts the lineage of Jewish history in which he situates himself and the crowd. He tells of Abraham and of Moses; Moses who was hidden as a child (because it wasn’t safe for him to be who he was – does this sound familiar??), who in his maturity defended the oppressed and worked toward reconciliation of those in conflict, who brought laws to the people. Stephen then castigates the crowd for not living up to their responsibilities: ⁵¹“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵²Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” This enraged the crowd and the priests, who gave the order to proceed to stone him.

Stephen speaks truth to power and he suffers the consequences. He dares to call people hypocrites, those who wear an external sign of religion (circumcision) without embracing in their hearts the core of the faith. When we illustrate by our words or actions what our core values are, when we challenge those who wear a cross around their neck and then oppress others, people will not always appreciate it, although we are less likely to be stoned in 21st century Halifax. We may, however, be symbolically stoned. For example, during the time leading up to the vote on same-sex marriage, a large rally was organized by the religious right in Halifax. My spouse and I decided to stage a counter-protest, so we went to this rally wearing sandwich boards that read “Equal rights for ALL of God’s children” and

“Intolerance is not a virtue”. Two of us, joined later by a few LGBT youth, stood in silent vigil facing this crowd of hundreds, many of whom walked over to us and had pretty despicable things to say. We must take these stands and continue to be the voice that says “there is plenty of room for us all in God’s house”.

On a more practical level, one issue that plagues transgender people is that of washrooms. I have heard a number of trans people say that they have at times avoided going to the washroom for an entire school or work day because no washroom really felt safe. Let me put in a recommendation that in the planning of our new building, we ensure that there are one or two single stall gender neutral washrooms, which could also be accessible washrooms.

We can also support the efforts to obtain funding by MSI for gender reassignment surgery. And we can offer support to trans people and their families (who are also undergoing a transition), as so many people did – friends, family, physicians -- for Misty and for us, helping to make her transition the successful and ultimately joyful process it was.

Finally, this experience was for me a powerful lesson in trust. Trust that the inner voice moving Misty along this path was the divine spark within her, leading her to live a life of integrity. Trust that she would be accepted and loved. And she was and is.

Thanks be to God.

Pat De Méo
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