

Human Diversity: Supporting Transgender Youth

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Childhood, puberty, and adolescence are those years between birth and adulthood that encompass an enormous arc of physical, mental, emotional, and social development in humans. **Every stage of growth makes its own contribution to our sense of self**, and even the minutest experience can have lasting effects long into adulthood. Those are years of great possibility and tremendous vulnerability. Add to that stew the emergence of psycho-sexual identity, a large dose of self-consciousness, and a yearning for peer acceptance, and you have a recipe for disaster if a healthy amount of love, support, and affirmation are not on the ingredient list. Famous child psychologist, Haim Ginott once said, “*Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression.*” Ask any psychologist today and they will tell you that the trauma of those crucial years helps to keep them in business.

Last week, the new Federal administration withdrew protections for transgender students in public schools that allowed them to use bathrooms and facilities corresponding with their gender identity. Already at risk with a 40% suicide rate among those in the trans population, transgender youth are now being put on display as dangerous oddities that are not equal under the law to their binary compatible counterparts. **No longer under Federal protection**, the dignity and safety of these children is now left up to individual states. What that really means is that it is now left up to us. “*There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul,*” said Nelson Mandela, “*than the way in which it treats its children.*”

Maybe you have a transgender person in your family. Or maybe you have a friend or neighbor who is trans. Or maybe you don't personally know anyone transgender, and never thought you would be called upon to use your voice to protect not only their basic human

rights, but their very existence. Indeed, this new turn of events is demanding that we each consider our relationship with and responsibility toward one another, *in all of our human expressions*. For some of us, this is the first time that we have truly been called upon to look beyond our own personal boundaries and consider the well-being of young people who are trying to claim their own identities and live their own truths as equals in a world that more often than not delegitimizes their very existence.

In the swirling chaos of this new world order in which we find ourselves, we have been presented with a most personal conundrum that speaks to the very essence of our humanity and to the very heart of the first principal of our faith. While we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, our society is being asked to define personhood, itself.

As we forge our way into the 21st century, life continues to reveal itself to us in heretofore unimaginable ways. Assumptions about the world in which we dwell are continuously being challenged, as we penetrate deeper into the complexity of all living matter. Perhaps the most perplexing of all the presumptions about observed life is reflected in our understanding of humanity, itself.

Over the centuries, the biological presentation of a child determined everything about its culturally intended identity, from what they wore, to what they needed to learn for its expected role in society, to whom they should show affection and sexually bond. For millenium, societal norms were **based upon those assumptions**, and any variations were oftentimes dealt with harshly...and unfortunately, in many places around the globe, that continues to this day. Yet, as the veils of unknowing have begun to lift, what we are learning is that biology and gender identity are not necessarily one and the same.

It was Virginia Woolf who wrote in her sublime meditation on gender, "*In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female.*" She

went on to say, “*the androgynous mind is resonant and porous... naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.*” But I would assert, although the line between where the mind ends and the body begins is ever-shifting, we often draw an artificial demarcation and end up divided within and among ourselves — nowhere more so than in the plight of transgender people.

The inner struggle for self-identity is part of the maturation process for all human beings, and at the same time it is a unique and solo journey for each us. It was only in the latter half of the 20th century that western culture **began** to slowly accept the fact that variations from the traditional understanding of what it means to be male and female were not merely unnatural deviations but rather within the realm of possible human expression. In other words, gender identity no longer needed to be dependent upon a particular physiological presentation caused by genetics and hormones. In fact, internal psychological perceptions combined with neurological impulses were observed to be more of a determining factor toward self-identity than the mere presence of specific genitalia.

The adage, *the heart wants what the heart wants*, is perhaps more truthful and powerful than any culturally or biologically mandated identification. The black, lesbian, feminist scholar, Audré Lourde explained it this way: *We all benefit by dismantling the mythical norm and understanding gender as a spectrum.*

When you suspend preconceived notions of gender, a new world of self-expression becomes possible. Yet, lest we think that transgender and gender-bending identification is a manifestation of modern-day social evolution, I would suggest that its impulse has always been present within the human family. **It was just hidden in plain sight.** Hidden behind pain-struck façades that obscured the true identity of a person’s soul, that kept their longing for self-expression and acknowledgment locked in a box called “shameful and sinful.” Well,

the lid to that box has been opened, but unfortunately the stigmata remains.

A few weeks ago my husband and I went to see the movie *Hidden Figures* about the African American women who were a major part of the genius behind the US Space program. Without giving away the storyline, there was one recurring scene where one of the women had been transferred to a building that did not have a restroom for colored women, so she would have to run nearly half a mile across the campus to a building that had one. The injustice was profound.

I couldn't help but notice that there were white people who felt the segregation was justified...after all, blacks were suspicious and less than equal in their eyes. Then there were white people who felt badly that this inequality existed at all, but it was the law of the land and they accepted it...after all, it **didn't affect them personally**. And then there were those few white people who saw the inhumanity of it all, and who chose to stand-up for those black Americans whose rights had been denied.

There are now transgender youth in every state of this union who are struggling with their internal and external identity, just like every other young person, only times ten. Not everyone understands their struggle, and because they don't, it is easy for them to allow their fears and suspicions **to justify their determinations** against the needs of trans youth. There are also those people who recognize the injustice, but because it doesn't directly affect them, *they remain silent*. Consequently, the physical health and mental well-being of these trans kids are being put at risk. Already vulnerable, they need our support and our voice to validate and protect them.

Besides the fact that their need to relieve themselves is just as urgent as the child's next to them, this is so much more than about restroom access. This is about equal human rights and protection under the law. Nelson Mandela reminds us that, "*Safety and security don't just*

happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear."

And so the time has come for us to let our collective voices be heard across this land: We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of **every** person. Period. Give the trans kids the key to the restroom of their choice, please! Nature is calling in more ways than one.

Amen and Blessed Be