

Symphony of Gender

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Gender is not a simple binary. Our dominant culture and our language might lead us to act as if there are only two genders, as opposite as day and night. When we listen to the real experiences of all of our friends and neighbors and siblings (and for some of us when we listen to the songs of our own hearts), not only do we gasp with the beauty of the gradations of color and majesty at dawn and dusk, we find our minds drawn to the spiral procession of millions of stars and planets beyond the single spectrum of one isolated world. Gender is a sparkling universe of wavelengths greater than the eye can see. Gender is a dance of billions of hands and feet and wheels each moving with their own rhythm and yet unified, together in the Spirit of Life. Gender is a symphony of expression and experience, a multi-layered witness to beauty and to the wholeness of humanity.

This is not to say that any two people of different genders might not play a joyful duet of friendship or partnership. Four or five people might create an ensemble, a family, out of a limited number of instruments, or even all the same instrument. Yet to insist that we all must accept at birth either the clarinet or the xylophone, and to stick with that one thing for all of the ways we want to make a sound for the rest of our lives, would reduce the humanity of the trombone players and percussionists and fiddlers of the world, and would rob us all of the music created when people are encouraged to live abundantly as their whole, authentic selves.

If you are a clarinet or a xylophone, that is lovely. There is nothing wrong with that. You can choose to be a clarinet that plays jazz or classical or klezmer music. You can be a xylophone that plays orchestral or folk or new age music. Your experience is true, just as the experience of a clarinet who was assigned xylophone at birth is true, just as the experience of a harpsichord who was assigned clarinet at birth is true, just as the experience of a sometimes-guitar-sometimes-harmonica-sometimes-piccolo is true, and just as every single form and voice and truth is needed in order to make all of the music humanity was meant to create.

Listen to the bass line from Pachelbel's Canon ("Alleluia Chaconne," #386 in *Singing the Living Tradition*):

Al-le. Lu-ia. Al-le. Lu-ia.

The bass line provides a nice foundation. The singer or musician can spend time on each note, like a clear declaration. Carrying the bass line in Pachelbel's Canon is a respectable position. And yet. That line by itself, out of relationship with the soprano and the alto and the tenor, does not communicate the glory of the piece as a whole.

I took cello lessons from the time I was about eleven years old until college. School recitals. Graduations. Receptions. I can tell you that the bass line from Pachelbel's Canon gets old, if that's all there ever is. I longed to be able to play other instruments, or at least other processionalists.

In a way, my relationship with the bass line of the Canon mirrors my relationship with gender. I'm going to share more of my story, not because it is normative or the most important story, but because it's a way to start a conversation and introduce some terms.

I was assigned female at birth. It takes work to learn how to demonstrate being a girl and a woman. I worked at it, and while there are aspects of female gender performance I'm less interested in, nobody has ever disagreed with me when I have declared myself to be a girl or a woman. I am a Cisgender woman; the gender I identify as and (more or less) present as matches the gender I was assigned at birth. A term like Cisgender is important, because it makes the beauty of diversity visible and honorable, rather than setting up some of us as the unthinking default and some of us as the dangerous and mysterious "other." In my family, womanhood was presented as being reliable and supportive, like the bass line of Pachelbel's Canon.

Al-le. Lu-ia. Al-le. Lu-ia.

As a young teen, I intensified my gender performance to a higher pitch, spending a lot of time on how I looked, worrying about getting girlhood "right." I attempted hyper-femininity, maybe in response to subconscious doubt. Now, if you are a very femme person, I admire that. I salute you with your perfectly winged eyeliner and your matching purse and shoes. You bring grace to this world, strength above the fray. Femininity sounded a little like the trilling top line of the song, which can be lovely when sung by other people, even though it was not authentic to me.

Alleluia, alleluia. Alleluia, alleluia. Alleluia, alleluia. Alleluia, alleluia.

In young adulthood, I had some uncertainty about my gender. I thought about changing my pronouns. I decided that I was not moving from the gender I was assigned at birth to another gender; I was not a Transgender person. I was not entirely outside of gender; I was not an Agender or a Gender Nonbinary person. And while I did experiment with

presentation, my gender identity did not change from day to day; I was not a Gender fluid person. I was a gender non-conforming woman, although non-conforming in a way that was safe enough in most circumstances. For instance, I was not challenged to prove that I was in the correct restroom, although I did get disapproving looks in formal settings. So I was somewhere in the middle, like the third line.

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

In my early thirties, I came back around to expanding my idea of gender, and I realized that, unlike my friends who are Transgender, Agender, Gender Nonbinary or Gender Fluid, I could be fairly comfortable with the identity I was assigned at birth. I had given it some thought, and was definitely a Cisgender person, someone who could stick with an expected harmony line.

I learned that my friends needed my support and solidarity, and I realized that I could offer that from the perspective of someone who has a ton of Cisgender privilege, even while being mildly gender non-conforming. The part I was assigned, expanded with new perspectives on what it could mean and deepened with maturity and practice, could be sung in an inclusive way. What's more, the music of life sounds best when we play together, correcting the historic exclusions that kept some of our musicians from the truth of their song.

My Transgender, Agender, Gender Nonbinary, Gender Fluid, Gender Fabulous, and gender non-conforming friends showed me that the symphony of human experience is broader than many of us realized. These friends changed the melodies and improvised music with courage and creativity. When every person can be fully and authentically themselves, the concert hall of human experience brings us into deeper connection with the Spirit of Life.

If gender diversity is new to you, there is one point I would like you to remember: Each person is the undisputed expert on their own gender. Nothing else supersedes a person's knowledge and declaration of themselves: not the form of their body, not hormones, not chromosomes, not what they wear, not official identification, not the presence or absence of hair, not health, not acceptance, not access to protection under the law. Each person is the expert on their own gender.

Those of us who are Cisgender people are called to put work into understanding, believing, and supporting our loved ones of many genders. We all benefit when every voice is lifted in the fullness of its own power, when all of our ways of being can grow into the wholeness of who we are.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are here to practice justice, equity, and compassion. We are here to cooperate with the forces that create and uphold life, to break down obstacles to the universal possibility of living whole, abundant, authentic lives. There are a few things we can do right away to put those values into action.

Respecting the pronouns someone uses is a basic way to show humanity. No matter how long you have been using a different set of pronouns for someone, use the pronouns that are correct now. Say “she” and “her” if that’s what she declares are her pronouns. Say “he” and “him” if that’s what he wants. There is no test or threshold that a person has to pass before it’s necessary to use the correct pronouns. Each person is the expert on their own gender. A person might use singular they/them pronouns, or another set of gender-neutral pronouns such as ze/zir, or they may not use pronouns at all and prefer to be referred to by name. If you don’t know someone’s pronouns, it is better to ask than to misgender someone.

In our congregation, we can work to communicate our welcome, and we can work to open our own minds and hearts. Last year, the Board asked for signs to make it clear that anyone is welcome to use the restroom that is most comfortable for them. The signage for multi-stall restrooms at Clover Lane was put on hold at the request of one or more Transgender members, who felt unsafe using the restroom, even with signage, if the congregation as a whole had not discussed and committed to a sincere welcome. The adult OWL class will cover gender diversity, and I hope we can look forward to a congregation-wide discussion after that.

Other than restrooms, we have a few more ways to improve our welcome. We might consider adding stickers to our nametags that will help normalize communication about pronouns. We might have people habitually share their pronouns, if they are comfortable doing so, in classes and committee meetings. Groups that are organized by gender could advertise that all people who identify with that gender are welcome. In our worship, when hymns and readings refer to the gender binary, we might either play with the words or acknowledge the limitations of the source.

As a supportive pastoral community, we can acknowledge the events that will feel especially joyful or sorrowful to Transgender and gender diverse communities. Some of our friends are at greater risk for violence. The murder rate for Transgender women of color has only gotten worse. Some of our friends live under legislation that puts their jobs, their homes, and their lives at risk due to gender. We can also lift up good news. We can celebrate progress. As of 2016, in Pennsylvania, gender confirmation surgery is not required for Transgender people to correct the gender on their birth certificates. We can lend our strength to legislative bills that go in the right direction, such as the

Pennsylvania Fairness Act. As a community, let us notice and act on opportunities to move in solidarity.

As allies out in the world, we can remember that gender diversity justice is tied together with all movements for justice. The voice of oppression is the voice that says only some are really human and the rest of us are dangerous others. The force of destruction says that we are only acceptable to the extent that we imitate and align with the powerful. Our theology resists and dismantles those forces. We remember that the Black Lives Matter movement declares that Black Transgender Lives matter. We remember that equal access to health care also affects access to culturally competent health care for people of all genders. We remember that oppression against Transgender people and misogyny are rooted together. Our feminism will be intersectional and will be inclusive.

There are many voices among us, and many talents that go beyond voice. There are many genders among us. Let us commit to increasing our hospitality here and transforming the world so that every person can grow with authenticity. Let us open our doors ever wider to welcome all who would join together in covenant. All of who you are is sacred. All of who you are is welcome here.