

**Gender Bender  
The Unitarian Church of Lincoln  
October 9, 2016**

“I am a rare species, not a stereotype.”  
— Ivan E. Coyote

***Gathering of the Community***

**Ring of Bell**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Prelude:** “None But the Lonely Heart”  
Piotr I. Tchaikovsky

***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** by G. Woods  
read by Jamie Radcliffe

**Opening words:** by G. Woods  
read by Gretchen Woods

**Hymn:** #131 “Love Will Guide Us”

***Time for all ages:*** with BJ Wheeler

**Shared Story**

**Children’s Song:** #1019 “Everything Possible”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** from *TransLiberation: beyond pink or blue*  
by Leslie Feinberg

**Musical Interlude:** #170

“We Are a Gentle, Angry People”

**Sermon:** “Gender Bender”

**Offering and Offertory:** “Di Tanti Palpate”  
from *Tancredi* by Gioacchino Rossini

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***

## **Sharing of Joys and Sorrows Meditation**

### ***Integration and Release***

**Closing Hymn:** #1014 “Standing on the Side of Love”

**Postlude:** “Over the Rainbow” Harold Arlen

**Closing Words**

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### ***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** by G. Woods

Fire reminds us of the flame within each of us  
That may burn brightly and give light to all  
Or be snuffed and lost to all.

May this be a place where each person’s light  
Is cherished for what it may bring  
To all of us.

**Opening words:** by G. Woods

Love moves each of us in different ways.  
We choose how we respond to our inner leanings,  
But we can not choose how loves moves us.  
May we become attuned to the greatest good for all,  
As the love that passes understanding  
So that our expressions of love reach out into our world  
As a beacon of healing and hope.

**Hymn:** #131 “Love Will Guide Us”

***Time for all ages:*** with BJ Wheeler

**Shared Story**

**Children’s Song:** #1019 “Everything Possible”

### ***Deepening***

**Reading:** from *TransLiberation: beyond pink or blue*  
by Leslie Feinberg

The sight of pink-blue gender-coded infant outfits may grate on your nerves. Or you may be a woman or man who feels at home in those categories. Transliberation defends you both.

Each person should have the right to *choose* between pink or blue tinted gender categories, as well as all the other hues of the palette. At this moment in time, that right is denied to us. But together, we could make it a reality.

. . .

I am a human being who would rather not be addressed as Ms. or Mr., ma'am or sir. I prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns like *sie* (*pronounced like "see"*) and *hir* (*pronounced like "here"*) to describe myself. I am a person who faces almost insurmountable difficulty when instructed to check off an "F" or an "M" box on identification papers.

I'm not at odds with the fact that I was born female-bodied. Nor do I identify as an intermediate sex. I simply do not fit the prevalent Western concepts of what a woman or a man "should" look like. And that reality has dramatically directed the course of my life.

I'll give you a graphic example. From December 1995 to December 1996, I was dying of endocarditis – a bacterial infection that lodges and proliferates in the valves of the heart. A simple blood culture would have immediately exposed the root cause of my raging fevers. Eight weeks of "round-the-clock" intravenous antibiotic drips would have eradicated every last seedling of bacterium in the canals of my heart. Yet I experienced such hatred from some health practitioners that I very nearly died.

I remember late one night in December my lover and I arrived at a hospital emergency room during a snowstorm. My fever was 104 degrees and rising. My blood pressure was pounding dangerously high. The staff immediately hooked me up to monitors and worked to bring down my fever. The doctor in charge began physically examining me.

When he determined that my anatomy was female, he flashed me a mean-spirited smirk. While keeping his eyes fixed on me, he approached one of the nurses, seated at a desk, and began rubbing her neck and shoulders. He talked to her about sex for a few minutes, After his pointed demonstration of “normal sexuality,” he told me to get dressed and then he stormed out of the room. Still delirious, I struggled to put on my clothes and make sense of what was happening.

The doctor returned after I was dressed. He ordered me to leave the hospital and never return. I refused. I told him I wouldn't leave until he could tell me why my fever was so high. He said, “You have a fever because you are a very troubled person.”

This doctor's prejudices, directed at me during a moment of catastrophic illness, could have killed me. The death certificate would have read: Endocarditis. By all rights it should have read: Bigotry.

As my partner and I sat bundled up in a cold car outside the emergency room, still reverberating from the doctor's hatred, I thought about how many people have been turned away from medical care when they were desperately ill – some because an apartheid “whites only” sign hung over the emergency room entrance, or some because their visible Kaposi's sarcoma lesions kept personnel far from their beds. I remembered how a blemish that wouldn't heal drove my mother to visit her doctor repeatedly during the 1950's. I recalled the doctor finally wrote a prescription for Valium because he decided she was a hysterical woman. When my mother finally got to specialists, they told her the cancer had already reached her brain. (Feinberg, *Transliberation*, pp. 1-3.)

**Musical Interlude:**

**Sermon:** “Gender Bender”

Sex Education has been integral to Unitarian Universalist religious education since the 1971 when the groundbreaking curriculum for seventh and eighth graders, “About Your Sexuality” by deryk calderwood, was released by the Unitarian Universalist Association. This curriculum caused quite a stir because it presented sex as healthy and valuable human experience - and it acknowledged homosexuality. Some of you may recall the most trumped up incident of media interest in UU sex education when Bryant Gumble made that AYS curriculum the focus of one of his TV series. Fortunately, the Rev. Dr. Roberta Nelson, one of our primary sex educators at the time, was able to debunk the whole thing on camera. After the show was over, when told by Gumble that he was on her side, she said, “Then shame on you Bryant Gumble!”

In the early 1990’s we realized that the AYS curriculum was in serious need of revision, given the rise of AIDS and of consciousness about the spectrum of gender. The result

is “Our Whole Lives,” geared not only to seventh and eighth graders, but with units addressed across the age spectrum from toddlers to adults.

In the moments we share today, at the request of the UCL-LGBTQA Welcoming Committee, I offer a deeper look into the broad spectrum of human experience of gender and the possibilities that opening our vision and understanding may offer each of us, no matter how we identify. I shall offer a definition, some history, and a vision for the future.

## **DEFINITION**

Some of us experience gender as deeply polarized into male/female, pink/blue perspectives. In contrast, Kinsey long ago recognized a bell curve of gender identification with ten percent in every culture solidly heterosexual in their internal and external experiences and ten percent solidly homosexual in their internal and external experiences. The other eighty percent rest somewhere along that bell curve. Yet our society and religions continue to insist on two, very

polarized ways of being human, rather than a spectrum of human experience.

This polarization does not take into account distinctions among biology, personal identification and affectional predisposition, which may or may not fit societal expectations. For example, a person may be born biologically female, as was Leslie Feinberg, but hir gender identification may not be female. It is also possible to not identify as female and still not identify as male. And the person(s) to whom sie is attracted may or may not be of the opposite biological gender.

Leslie Feinberg tells us:

Today the word transgender has at least two colloquial meanings. It has been used as an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender. It is also used to draw a distinction between those who reassign the sex they were labeled at birth, and those of us whose gender expression is considered inappropriate for our sex. . .

I asked many self-identified transgender activists. . . who they believed were included under the umbrella term. Those polled named: transexuals, transgenders, transvestites,

transgenderists, bi(-)genders, drag queens, drag kings, cross-dressers, masculine women, feminine men, intersexuals (people referred to in the past as “hermaphrodites”), androgynes, cross-genders, shape-shifters, passing women, passing men, gender-benders, gender-blenders, bearded women, and women bodybuilders who have crossed the line of what is considered socially acceptable for a female body.

. . . *Transgender* people traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the sex they were assigned at birth. (Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, p. x.)

During my lifetime so far, I have known at least one person from each category Feinberg mentions. I suspect each of you knows at least one person who fits one of these categories. You just may not know that they do. Certainly I find myself most comfortable with the label transgender because I have never felt particularly female – or male, as stereotyped in our western society. I love certain things about being female, especially bearing children, and I have often been told “You have a lot of male energy!” and “You think like a man.” I have been called “sir” more than once, especially on the phone.

It is difficult for people to make sense of gender because it is not one thing, though it is often treated as such.

First, there's the age-old question at birth: Is it a boy or a girl? This refers to the biological equipment the child appears to have. Fact is: a child can have varied equipment biologically.

Then there is the question: how does the person feel inside their self about their identity? Thus we have people with male organs and a female self-identification.

But there is more: How does the person choose to present one's self to the world. This involves how one dresses, accessorizes, etc.

Then, how does a person find one's self pre-disposed affectionally. A person can have male genitalia, a female identity, and feel drawn to females or males or asexual people. So it goes, there is so much more to understand.

So, leaving that confusion hanging, let us briefly look at what we can say about transgendered folks who appear throughout history, especially as related to spiritual practices.

## **HISTORY**

Historians posit a pre-patriarchal, post- Stone Age, matrilineal period in which the Great Mother was worshiped in the Middle East, Northern Africa, Europe and western Asia. Records indicate that some of her priestesses were male-to-female transsexuals. “Roman historian Plutarch described the Great Mother as an intersexual (hermaphroditic) deity in whom the sexes had not yet been split. (Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, p. 40.) Some of the priestesses of the Great Mother “. . . followed an ancient and sacred path of rituals that included castration. . . Statues of Diana were often represented draped with a necklace made of the testicles of her priestesses.” (Ibid.)

There is disagreement among scholars as to whether castration was a chosen spiritual practice or a way to wrest power from the women who had held it.

Transgender people have been known as religious leaders in many varied cultures.

“For example, African spiritual beliefs in intersexual deities and sex/gender transformation among their followers have been documented among the Akan, Ambo-Kwanyama, Bobo, Chokwe, Dahomeans (of Benin), Dogon, Bambara, Etik, Handa, Humbe, Hunde, Ibo, Jukun, Kimbundu, Konso, Kunama, Lamba, Lango, Luba, Lulua, Musho, Nuba, Ovimbundu, Rundi, Shona-Karonga, Venda, Vili-Kongo and Yoruba.

Transgender in religious ceremony is still reported in the twentieth century in west Africa. And cross-dressing is a feature of modern Brazilian and Haitian ceremonies derived from west African religions. (Ibid. p. 44.)

“. . . many Native Nations on the North American continent made room for more than two sexes, and there appeared to have been a fluidity between them” (Ibid. p. 43.) In addition, there are records of

transgender identities and practices in every traditional Asian society, according to Pauline Park, who is Korean American.

In ancient China, the *shih-niang* wore a combination of female, male, and religious garb. In Okinawa, some shamans took part in an ancient male-to-female ceremony known as *winagu-nati*, which means, “becoming female.” And trans shamans were still reported practicing in the Vietnamese countryside in the mid-1970s.

Female-to-male priests also exist – and most importantly, even co-exist with male-to-female shamans. Among the Lugbara in Africa, for example, male-to females are called *okule* and female-to-males are named *agule*. . . Inuit female-to-males serve White Whale Woman, who was believed to have been transformed into a man or a woman-man. (Ibid p. 45.)

What interests me most is that Feinberg posits that the historic overthrow of communalism with a relatively class-free structure is also the root of trans oppression. As wealth could be stored and stockpiled, men took charge of the accumulation of wealth. Before that tools, utensils, and food surplus were held within the matrilineal commune. “Men began to pass on inheritance to their male heirs. . . These

inequalities, small at first, became the basis of the enrichment of some male tribal members over the women and the tribe as a whole.” Ibid. p. 52.) From the perspective of Feinberg, Merlin Stone, Gerda Lerner (in *The Creation of Patriarchy*) and several other scholars, class divisions, slavery, and labeling of other people as “different,” resulted directly from the concept of ownership of property and the overthrow of “mother-right.”

The earliest overthrow of mother-right took place in the fertile river valleys of Eurasia and northeast Africa during the period of about 4500 to 1200 B.C.E. In this new social structure, riven by inequality, male ruling class attitudes toward women and trans people grew more and more hostile, even toward transgendered queens and kings. . .

Hostility to transgender, sex-change, intersexuality, women, and same-sex love became a pattern wherever class antagonisms deepened. . .

And I found that wherever the ruling classes became stronger, the laws grew increasingly more fierce and more relentlessly enforced. (Ibid. p. 53.)

Feinberg gives us real food for thought with this unabashed assertion that the development of class distinctions

underpins most oppressions, whether of women, races, or gender differences. I believe it is worth consideration as we move on.

## **A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

I admit that I may still find it jarring to meet a new-to-me transgendered person for the first time, even as I self-identify in that category. The lack of usual social cues leaves me stranded as to pronouns, which I still get mixed up, even with my friends. I do like the idea of *sie* , for she/he and *hir* for his/her, as much for their sound as their efficacy. Clearly we are called to look more deeply and to listen more fully to a greater spectrum of human experience (to see and hear what that is, rather than imposing a limited view), without prejudice for the roles and expectations we have internalized from our society.

Our Unitarian Universalist value of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” calls us to hear and see people who have been rendered invisible and unacceptable from a

deeply polarized view of possibility for human expression.

We are called by our faith to a broader view and deeper love

which liberates all of us from limited perspectives of

ourselves as well as others. Leslie Feinberg puts it this way:

. . . most of the thoughts and beliefs that we are challenging were imposed on us from above, were rotten to the core and were backed up by bigoted laws. But we're not taking away your identity. No one's sex reassignment or fluidity of gender threatens your right to self-identify and self-expression. On the contrary, our struggle bolsters your right to your identity. My right to be me is tied with a thousand threads to your right to be you.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to join in the

liberation struggle for all people to be fully the best they can

be with respect, responsibility, and relish for the process.

This is a spiritual and emotional as well as a political

statement.

So Be It! Blessed Be!

**Offering and Offertory:**

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***  
**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

## **Meditation**

### ***Integration and Release***

**Closing Hymn:** #1014 “Standing on the Side of Love”

**Postlude:**

**Closing Words:** #576 (SLT) “A Litany of Restoration”  
By Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley