

- IS DAD GENDER EXPANSIVE? -
Cedars UU Church, June 17, 2018
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Today is both Father's Day and the day that Cedars celebrates Pride month and status as a Welcoming Congregation to lgbtqix people. So, we ask, "Is Dad Gender Expansive?"

In many ways, my dad was a classic 20th century man. He went through college on a football scholarship. He was a university professor and great at tennis. He was tall, strong, dark, silent and rugged, yet he loved to play with children and tell jokes. He often went into the Rocky Mountains to ski and hike and camp. Almost single handedly he cut a road through an outcropping of sandstone using on a pick-axe and a shovel. Being liberal, my dad understood and sympathized with feminism and civil rights. He was even tolerant of my lack of interest in football. He stood by my mom when she explained that Katie and Jo, the two women who had moved into our basement apartment in the mid-60s, were like husband and wife. And he nodded affirmatively when she later explained that Jo wanted to be thought of as a boy and to be called "him" rather than "her." But, my dad was not gender-expansive.

I was listening to an interview with the writer of a new movie, *A Kid Like Jake*, starring Claire Danes and Octavia Spencer. The love is about the parents of a kid who does not follow gender norms. Octavia's character, a teacher, refers to Jake as "gender expansive." The movie is not about him, but about marriage and regular people struggling to face social change. The writer of the film, Daniel Pearl, mentioned how much he liked the term, so I did some research and learned that in 2012, The Human Rights Campaign, first used the term "gender expansive" to label youth who did not identify with traditional gender roles and were also not confined to any single gender narrative or experience. This term allows us to talk about those who don't meet social expectations without putting their identity in a box. More importantly, this term helps us expand the understanding of what it means to be human.

The key value here is dignity, as in the UU principle of "inherent worth and dignity." Worth is about our value of something, as in "not worthless." I hope you never feel worthless, or that if you do, this community restores your pride. Dignity, on the other hand, refers to active inclusion and honor given to someone in society. Dignity is the right of a person to be valued and respected for their own sake and to be treated ethically. It arises from the desire to be seen and recognized, heard and understood, and be dealt with fairly. The word comes from an ancient Roman concept of the power of a citizen. It is the foundation on which we give civil rights, freedom, independence, self-determination, and thus a life of hope and possibility. It is the social expression of what today we call "Pride."

Years ago, while serving a mid-western congregation, I received a letter from a 12-year-old boy to tell me that I was in great error for affirming gay marriage. Citing the Biblical book of

Genesis, he said that God had only created marriage for men and women. He then went on to decry my affirmation of transgender people saying that a man could not be put in a woman's body because "God cannot make a mistake." This is a basic assumption that God has created us only male and female. To keep things simple and manageable, the image that society presents is of a circle with men on one side and women on the other and a solid line dividing us down the middle. But, as our Cedars member, Scot Hendrick pointed out, biological sex is one thing, gender is something else, and it is largely made up and arbitrary. To be born male is not the same thing as "being a man." Gender, what we expect of and allow for men and women builds on stereotypes, generalizations, random cultural choices, and assumptions.

We all know these so-called differences very well. They are given to us early and hard learned. For example, I heard that when Doctor Frankenstein had created his "male" monster, he decided to create the "Bride of Frankenstein." His servant, Igor brought him a brain and said, "Here master, a woman's brain. It only cost us \$100, when any male brain would cost us \$1000."

The Doctor asked, "Why are female brains so much less expensive?"

Igor replied, "Because all the women's brains are used."

We all know and feel part of the division of men and women. There seems to be no middle ground.

We are often presented as though gender is how God, or similarly "Biology," has determined things to be. However, I must note that it is a scientific, verifiable, and thus I would say "God-given" fact, that a few people are born with indeterminate gender. In the mid-20th Century doctors were afraid of someone living in our society without a clear gender, and aware that it is easier to heal from such surgery as an infant than as an adult, assigned a gender to these intersex people.

Besides the personal consequences of these medical choices, by hiding these few, they also added to the attempt to hide those other people whose bodies seemed to have clear gender but did not fit the norm. They did not fit regarding sexual orientation, and more importantly regarding affectional orientation. Many others do not fit gender stereotypes, and thus we UUs affirm the Pride of what some call the alphabet soup: lbgtqiax (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender, queer, intersex, allies, and others). Our culture is changing. Today I find it uplifting and amazing to go to junior high and high schools and find so many people who are gladly expanding and blurring the boundaries of gender.

In fact, it is not just those few gender-fluid, gender-queer, and intersex people whose Pride is threatened by the conservative element of our culture. The biological reality is that gender for everyone is more like yin-yang than the rigid male-female binary. There is not a straight line between the two but something more fluid, one bending into the other showing flow across boundaries and interrelatedness. What is more, in the center of one is a core circle that is from

the other. To expand genders is to allow them to overlap and thus to understand each person better and to expand the power of Pride. Now, as you may know, I am a straight, cis-gender male. That means I easily identify with the gender that others gave to me at birth. I use and respond without question to pronouns like “him, his, and he.” However, I have come to understand myself better by expanding my gender.

For instance, when I was a young minister, I had some troubles as a leader of a small congregation in Texas. I went to a psychologist. At one point we were talking about my religious understanding of peacemaking and conflict. He quickly noted that beneath my theology were powerful issues about facing anger and fear. He asked me to buy and read a book about anger, *the Dance of Anger*, by Doctor Harriet Lerner. It was a very useful book for me. Here are a few lines from the first chapter:

“Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to. Women, however, have long been discouraged from the awareness and forthright expression of anger. [Acting as the “nice-lady: or the “bitch} may appear to be a different as night and day. In reality, they both serve equally well to protect others, to blur our clarity of self, and to ensure that change does not occur.”

This is a book written by a woman for other women. Somehow, regarding anger, I had socialized as a female. I came to understand that I hid my anger, even from myself. I did this to protect others, blur my own identity and to protect myself from change. In some ways, I do not think and act at all like my gender stereotype to the point that one person accused me of being “a lesbian in a man’s body.” I am OK with that. I am what I am.

In response to those who want to reinforce gender stereotypes I say, “If men are from Mars and women are from Venus, then people are from Earth.” In fact, I have found that most adults grow to understand that the boundaries between male and female are largely arbitrary and permeable and that we are each a unique blending of the wholeness of humanity. Furthermore, indigenous cultures in regions from Oaxaca, Mexico to the Isles of Samoa and Madagascar have accepted the idea of the “third gender” for centuries. This understanding thrives in the structure of their languages. Likewise, some North American tribes speak of “two-spirit” persons. Some people are not one or the other but both. One of the most famous was We’wha. Born Zuni in a male body, We’wha wore a mixture of men’s and women’s clothing, spent time performing women’s tasks, and served as an honored mediator for the Zuni.

Our UU religious response is not to try and eliminate the idea of gender. It is too useful and pervasive to disappear. Instead, we approach gender with a learning spirit and seek to serve justice with compassion.

The first response is raising awareness. One moment I had of awareness was a month or so ago when we all sang a great anti-war song from the 60s, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*. I have always liked this song. But when we sang it, I immediately noticed that “**all** the young women”

not only picked flowers but went “to young men.” I thought, “none went to lesbian partners, nor board rooms, no military service for any of them?” And then “all the young men” went to war and death. Likewise, you noticed that I changed the wording of your chalice affirmation from “brothers and sisters” to “our family.” The point is not to censor the song or the affirmation, or to neuter them, but to raise awareness of all the unconscious ways we maintain the un-fluid binary of gender.

The next form of response is to affirm the Pride of those who are clearly on the boundary and in the struggle. Next week Bainbridge is holding a Pride picnic. Cedars will have a table and tent there. If you can, show up for a few minutes or hours, and be affirmative. Embody “love beyond judgement.” On the 24th is the big Pride Parade in Seattle. Show up and be affirmative. Then, you can go on beyond affirmation to resist. Resist all those who think it is good to deny, hate and hurt transgender, third gender, or two-spirit people.

By the way, I asked my daughters how they saw my gender. They said I seemed like a straight and ordinary male. But they also saw how I affirmed that boys and girls could grow up to be anything. They saw me conduct gay weddings even when the law did not sanction them. They saw me being kind to macho-men and flaming gay men who could also be good dads. I don't know how gender expansive is, or was, your father. I know that the category of “dad” can be gender expansive, depending on your awareness. The point of honoring your father is to acknowledge that you are here because of where you started, one way or another. I encourage you to be strong and gentle in affirming gender-expansive people and thus help this childish world to grow up.