

“Violence in Large and Small Ways”

A sermon for the Transgender Day of Remembrance

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Questioning the rigidity of gender roles was part of the ethos when I was born in the early 1970's into the wake of a powerful feminist movement. I absorbed cultural messages that as a girl, “I could be anything I wanted to be” but that I also better be ready for some sexism along the way. By the time I became a parent in the 1990's, I wanted to pass along similar empowering messages of self-expression to my son. I didn't want to insist he play only with “boy” toys. And indeed, he had quite the collection of Barbies.

By the time he was five, his favorite play outfit was the pink gown I had once worn as a flower girl, which he chose to wear with a pair of cowboy boots, an American flag tied into a cape, and a shiny plastic silver sword. Fierce *and* flowing.

At one point I took him to see a therapist. “Is Alek transgender?!?” I asked. After a few sessions, the therapist simply told me time would tell. Or, more precisely, he would tell us by his choices and self-awareness as he matured. In time, Alek came out as a gay young man. In high school, he comfortably attended classes with nail polish while otherwise presenting as male. And, for his senior year dress-up day, he rocked a flamboyant Cupid costume that yours truly sewed him.

At the same time I was parenting Alek, I pursued my doctorate in Religion, Gender, and Culture at Harvard Divinity School. As such, my interest in these questions have been both intellectual and grounded in the lived experience of watching someone I love wrestle with questions of gender and sexuality. From the academic lens, the questions can sometimes seem complex. As a parent, I just wanted my son to be safe, happy, and loved.

Religion and gender have long been intertwined. In proscribing behavior for how to live one's life, social and religious ideas have reinforced ideas of proper gender behavior. To this day, many religions use gender to create expectations of behavior as well as to maintain barriers to certain rituals or leadership roles. Gender identity and expression have not been incidental characteristics in most human societies; they have functioned to tell people how to dress and move one's body as well as who to respect and who can be harmed without impunity. Given the importance of gender in society, it should not be a surprise that challenging the rigidity of gender roles, as feminists have done, generated backlash

and conflict. No wonder the increased visibility of transgender, genderqueer, and nonbinary folks has been a cultural flashpoint.

Perhaps belatedly I'll pause to define a couple terms. People who identify by the gender assigned to them at birth by doctors, parents, etc. are known as cisgender. This designation is typically made by looking at external sex characteristics to define "boy" or "girl". And here is where the debate around gender begins. Can one's sexuality—those visible sex organs, hormones, body hair patterns, etcetera—be separated from one's gender identity? Are sex and gender the same? Does being born with one kind of sexed body mean that you must also adhere to your societal expectations for the gender expression associated with that body? Or, if they are distinct, can a person identify as a gender different than that assigned at birth? Transgender folks are those that identify with a gender different than that assigned at birth. And sometimes, gender identity is not even as simple as just choosing to jump from the box marked "male" to the box marked "female." Sometimes it's about exploring both boxes or taking bits and pieces from each box or even [throwing the boxes away entirely](#). Such a range of gender identity falls into the broad identity of genderqueer.

Understanding gender as holding this many possibilities for identity and expression can be unsettling within cultures long accustomed to a simple system of two binary boxes marked "male" and "female" as assigned at birth. The expansion of gender identity and expression can be downright confusing for many. And for some, it seems fundamentally wrong. And too often, religious texts are used as "proof" for rigid understandings of gender. No wonder a [2018 Human Rights Campaign report](#) says that "only 4% of transgender youth say they are out about their gender identity to their religious community." 4%!

In an essay on [Transtorah.org](#) by Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman, they wrestle with the meaning of the verse, "A man's clothes should not be on a woman, and a man should not wear the apparel of a woman; for anyone who does these things, it is an abomination before God." (Deut. 22:5) This is the kind of verse used as ammunition against trans folks. However, in exploring the oral tradition and commentary, Kukla and Zellman find that the prohibition against cross-dressing emerges in contexts when it is used for the purposes of adultery or idol worship. In other words, they explain, "wearing clothes of 'the wrong gender' is proscribed only when it is for the express purpose of causing harm to our relationship with our loved ones or with God."

Turning to understand the meaning of this insight for today, Kukla and Zellman write:

Many people feel like their true gender is not (or is not only) the gender that was assigned to them at birth. The Torah is asking us not to misrepresent our gender, which we can understand as using external garments to conceal our inner selves. Unfortunately, many transgender and genderqueer people today feel forced to hide in exactly this way. In our society the penalty for expressing the fullness of a gender-variant identity is often severe and can include verbal, sexual, and physical abuse, employment discrimination, an inability to access education and health care and, sometimes, murder.

For too many transgender and genderqueer people, the “penalty” of expressing their inner selves through “outer garments” can be steep, even unto death as we have bore witness to today.

Kukla and Zellman join with Classical Jewish scholars to reject a narrow-minded interpretation that simply condemns “cross-dressing.” Rather, they insist, “we can flip mainstream understandings of our verse on their head and understand it as a positive *mitzvah*, a sacred obligation to present the fullness of our gender as authentically as possible.” While it is not always safe for transgender folks to be expressive due to the “penalty” society can extract, not living authentically can also bring harm. They write:

Transgender and genderqueer people who hide under the clothing of the gender they were assigned – rather than expressing themselves as they really are – suffer terrible harm. Rates of depression, suicide, and destructive self-medication are astronomical.

Each and every soul is created in the multifaceted image of the Creator. When we try to conceal that uniqueness, we cause ourselves pain. And when we ask others to obscure themselves we cause them harm.

Preventing harm to self or to another is the core message of this verse then. Do not hide who you are by wearing false outer garments. Nor do not ask another to hide.

In closing their reflection on this verse on cross-dressing, Kukla and Zellman point out that the surrounding verses also carry messages of preventing harm. These verses counsel us to help a person lift a fallen donkey, to not hurt a mother bird while collecting her eggs, and to build a guardrail on your roof to keep people from falling off. As Kukla and Zellman summarize, “The verse about what to wear is nestled amongst *mitzvot* that guide us towards exquisite levels of empathy and gentleness towards all of creation.”

This ethical guide to bring empathy and gentleness towards all of creation feels apt on a day when we remember the transgender lives lost to murder this year. What if we heeded this call? What if we did all we could to prevent such large violence, such “penalties” for living authentically? What if we could be a religious community where transgender folks felt truly safe being out about their gender identity?

One visible way that many groups and institutions are trying to make the world feel safer for trans folks is normalizing the sharing of pronouns in introductions or nametags. *Please raise your hand if you have been in a meeting or at an event when you’ve been asked to do this.* For me, I first encountered this at an event for internship supervisors at Harvard Divinity School about four or five years ago. I found it odd, awkward, and unfamiliar. Later that same year when I began to teach a course at the school, the students introduced themselves with both their names and pronouns even though I had not asked them to do so. Of the nine students studying to be UU ministers, three used they/them pronouns. Without this exercise, I would not have known their preference. I would have made my best guess and, quite likely, been wrong and misgendered them.

And such misgendering harms. It is a small violence that asks another to wear the wrong clothes, to hide their authentic self.

In a [satirical treatment](#) about being asked to use they/them pronouns by a friend, columnist Jennifer Fumiko Cahill writes:

Firstly, the grammar gets me. . . I literally can't make myself use incorrect English. If someone isn't happy with he/she, then they can come up with something else that will hopefully require no transitional effort from me personally.

Changing our habits of language and of social interaction can indeed require effort from us. It can feel awkward, unfamiliar, and odd. And yet, it is also a practice that can normalize the reality that not everyone identifies with the gender assigned them at birth, nor does everyone identify with the gender you may associate with the way you perceive their self-expression. We don't pretend to tell people what their name is, we let them tell us. So also with preferred pronouns and gender expression. Call people what they wish to be called. And, if you're not certain, you can always ask.

In promoting the use of pronouns as a way to normalize a range of self-identified gender expression, I want to acknowledge that not everyone will feel comfortable sharing their pronouns. They may be figuring it out themselves. They may wish to hold it privately. They may not wish to be “out” in a particular setting—such as their work or their religious

community. They may have other reasons. For this reason, I [do not believe in requiring](#) people to share their pronouns. Please hear this again. I am *not* saying that you *must* share your pronouns. This is not a dictum—*as if a group of UU's would allow me to get away with that!*

However, I am concerned by rumblings I have heard that disparage the use of pronouns. Such rumblings sadden me and, frankly, motivated this sermon. For me, using pronouns is not about someone else's politically correct agenda, nor is it the newest left fad. Rather, I understand using pronouns as one way to show love for those who are seeking to wear the right clothes for their authentic inner selves. Using pronouns also affirms the expansion of gender expression that I as a feminist have benefited from in my own life—such as standing here identifying as a female in a role long reserved in history for those who identify as male. And using pronouns is a way that I'm responding to what I have learned from my son and other young adults who are pointing the way on this issue.

So no, you do not have to use pronouns, but, as you are willing, I hope you might try. And, in the spirit of seeking to show “empathy and gentleness towards all of creation,” I hope that we might not disparage those for whom this is important. Affirming authentic gender-expression may not only [reduce the risk of harm](#) for transgender persons, it might also teach us all something about the role of gender in our culture, our religion, our selves.

So may it be, amen.