

**Gender Expression: Beyond Boys and Girls**  
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**March 9, 2008**

Reading habits are revealing. What kind of books or magazine articles tend to receive a warm welcome in your home? Fiction? Nonfiction? I confess that I gravitate toward nonfiction because truth is stranger than fiction. However, for fans of fiction, what kind of fiction do you prefer? Historical novels? Spy thrillers? Murder mysteries?

If I had to select a favorite category of fiction, it would be science fiction. I love the writer's freedom to create worlds which do not yet exist, whether the world is utopia or the opposite, dystopia. Both visions of a better world and cautionary tales about a more oppressive world have a place. On the dystopia side of things, I like the movie "Blade Runner." In contrast, and although it has been a while since I read it, I recall placing the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin on the utopia side of things. In that novel, the inhabitants of Le Guin's fictional world have the potential to be male or female for two days each month. The rest of the time, they have no gender. During the two days a month that they have a gender, their gender can change from one month to the next.

Philosophically, I have often been on the same wavelength as the singer/songwriter Patti Smith, who said, "As far as I'm concerned, being any gender is a drag."<sup>1</sup> For me, that jaundiced view of gender emerged from the blur of life as seen through the lens of 1970's-era feminism, 1980'-era lesbian pride, and 1990's-era bisexual pride. I have looked through increasingly subtle anti-oppression "lenses," so to speak, for over 30 years. Though the image changes and though colors and proportions shift, one constant is this: The range of socially acceptable behavior for women remains unduly constrained, and the range of socially acceptable behavior for men remains unduly constrained.

Another constant is this: While oppression based on gender expression brings heartache, we shortchange ourselves and each other if we neglect gender expression as a playground of the

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/patti\\_smith.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/patti_smith.html).

body, mind, and spirit. Gender expression can be a field of play, creativity, and subversion of the dominant paradigm. My personal “any gender is a drag” attitude has shifted in recent years. Why? I have met people who play with gender expression, treating it lightly, virtually as an artistic medium. I have also met people for whom gender and gender expression are not laughing matters but rather are central to their sense of self and to their way of being in the world.

In Unitarian Universalist congregations, there is room for all of us – for those who play with gender expression, for those who feel that any gender is a drag, and for those who enlarge humanity and extend divinity by taking gender and gender expression very seriously. I am going to take a moment to make some distinctions. Some of the distinctions may sound like splitting hairs, but nothing is farther from the truth. By grasping these distinctions, we can bring more physical and emotional safety into the world, more love into the world, and more justice into the world.

Gender and gender expression are not the same thing. People sharing a gender can have different ways of expressing their gender. Gender expression and sexual orientation are not the same thing. People sharing the same gender expression can have different sexual orientations, and people sharing the same sexual orientation can have different ways of expressing their gender.

Sexual orientation generally relates to who we are attracted to. Gender expression generally relates to how we present ourselves to the world in terms of dress, speech, and interests. Gender expression is something that all of us have. Identifying as transgender is something that fewer of us claim. When people feel a profound disconnect between their physical bodies and their felt sense of who they are in terms of gender, they may identify as transgender. All of this gets confusing, in part because of the commonly used phrase GLBT or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. The phrase should really be gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender because some transgender people are heterosexual. Heterosexual transgender people can feel invisible if the assumption is that they are always gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

With all that said, after distinguishing between gender expression (something we all have) and transgender people (an identity that fewer of us claim), I want to make this point: Transgender people can help those of us who do not identify as transgender to understand the complexities of gender more fully. Their life experiences can help us understand our life experiences, and not only that. With greater understanding, non-transgender people can be better allies with transgender people. Recently, the Unitarian Universalist Association's Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns published (online) a collection of essays, poems, and sermons entitled *Crossing Paths: Where Transgender and Religion Meet*.

In the preface, Mr. Barb Greve writes, "This collection is my attempt to remind all of us that religious people are involved in transgender issues and transgender people are leading religious lives. We lead intersecting lives, where paths cross and plurality begins."<sup>2</sup> In gratitude for the brave ones and for the funny ones and for the fragile ones and for the resilient ones who offered their stories in *Crossing Paths*, I lift up part of one essay, entitled "Transparent" by Anonymous.

This parent writes about a daughter who does not act like most other girls. The author and the author's partner consult a therapist. They are concerned about how to be good parents to their daughter, whose gender expression is unusual. The therapist says, among other things, "Open up language about different kinds of girls and different kinds of boys."<sup>3</sup> The author and the author's partner now use household language about 'girly girls,' boy-y girls,' 'girly boys' and 'boy-y boys.' This gives kids some room in which to move around. Who among us would not appreciate a little more maneuvering room regarding gender expression? In my version of a perfect world, girly girls, boy-y girls, girly boys, and boy-y boys are equally valued!

Yet we absorb the stigmas of our culture. Several years ago, I heard of a male Unitarian Universalist minister who sometimes wears lipstick when preaching. He reportedly believes that wearing lipstick makes it easier for his hard-of-hearing congregants to read his lips and thus to understand his message. I cannot argue with the logic, though my initial response was to raise an eyebrow -- an eyebrow I raised much more quickly than if a female minister happened to have

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.uua.org/documents/obgltc/crossingpaths.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Crossing Paths: Where Transgender and Religion Meet*, page 8.

worn lipstick for the same reason. I will have made progress when my eyebrow remains immobile the next time I hear about something like this. I will have made progress when I speak up if others make jokes. That is the least I can do for 15-year-old Larry King, who was killed not long ago by a classmate in his Oxnard middle school.

One of my bad habits is trying to squeeze too many ideas into a single sermon. I'll turn over a new leaf . . . next week. There is something else I want to say about gender expression. It will not be news to participants in the recent adult religious education sessions which focuses upon Ken Wilber's book, *The Integral Vision*.<sup>4</sup> Ken Wilber's primary contribution to philosophy and spirituality is to offer a conceptual orienting "map" which can help us understand common dynamics in life and can help us avoid common pitfalls. It is no surprise that he characterizes gender diversity as a diversity of "type." No gender is superior to any other. Here is where he is provocative. While each gender tends to have a characteristic healthy expression, each gender also tends to have a characteristic unhealthy expression. Using shorthand, he calls this "sick boy" and "sick girl."

Ken Wilber says, "If the healthy masculine principle tends toward autonomy, strength, independence, and freedom, when that principle becomes unhealthy or pathological, all of those positive virtues either over- or under-fire. There is not just autonomy, but alienation; not just strength, but domination; not just independence, but morbid fear of relationship and commitment; not just a drive toward freedom, but a drive to destroy. The unhealthy masculine principle does not transcend in freedom, but dominates in fear."

He continues, "If the healthy feminine principle tends toward flowing, relationship, care, and compassion, the unhealthy feminine flounders in each of those. Instead of being in relationship, she becomes lost in relationship. Instead of a healthy self in communion with others, she loses her self altogether and is dominated by the relationships she is in. Not a connection, but a fusion;

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<sup>4</sup> *The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*, Ken Wilber, Shambhala Publications, Boston, 2007.

not a flow state, but a panic state; not a communion, but a melt-down. The unhealthy feminine principle does not find fullness in connection, but chaos in fusion.”<sup>5</sup>

Speaking statistically, many religious movements tend to attract women to a greater degree than they attract men. It is not unusual for women to outnumber men in terms of week to week participation in religious life. Today, two thirds of Unitarian Universalist seminarians are women. Today, women serve as ministers in fully half of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Over the past 30 years or more, Unitarian Universalists have become exquisitely attuned to nuances of “power over” and how to counter unhealthy expressions of “power over.” We have become fairly adept at recognizing and countering so-called “sick boy” behavior.

I wonder whether, as a movement, we might benefit from developing greater skill at recognizing and countering so-called “sick girl” behavior, that is, upon unhealthy expressions of “power with.” Becoming lost in relationships and living in a state of emotional fusion are as damaging as domination. We are all “agents in communion,” so to speak, and we can exhibit unhealthy communion, as well as unhealthy agency.

To conclude, may we value ‘girly girls,’ ‘boy-y girls,’ ‘girly boys’ and ‘boy-y boys’ alike, with one caveat. May we value health over pathology, health over sickness. In Unitarian Universalist congregations, we can support each other and can support children and youth in gaining the tools and support needed to create a world where *no one* is at risk of harm on account of gender expression. May it be so!

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<sup>5</sup> “Introduction to Integral Theory and Practice: IOS Basic and the AQAL Map,” Ken Wilber, page 18. See <http://holons-news.com/free/whatisintegral.pdf>.