

**Gender Identity 101**  
**Rev. Cathy Rion Starr, Unitarian Society of Hartford**

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*How can we ever-more conscious, welcoming, sensitive to the experience of people in our communities who are transgender or exploring the spectrum of gender identity? How does understanding trans issues open up space for all of us to be more free in our genders?*

For nearly 4 years now, we have been asked “boy or girl?” My stock answer has been “girl, for now.” Robin’s sex is female, and Robin will decide her gender as she grows, and it may change – hence the “for now.” I would prefer to simply not share Robin’s sex, especially when she was a baby, but some people get really angry when you won’t tell them, and some even have told us “no, he’s a boy.”

Why does it matter what sex or gender my child is, especially to a stranger? The truth is that the gender binary system has a strong hold on our society and on each one of us, beginning in utero.

The gender binary system is the cultural system that says there are only two genders: men and women, and the system that upholds an ideal of what it means to be a man or a woman (or a boy or a girl).

We could make a list of “boy” things and “girl” things man/woman things – and even as they’ve changed across the generations thanks to feminist movements (and reactions to feminism as well), these lists still exist.

Black, lesbian, feminist Audre Lorde talked about “a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me.’”<sup>1</sup>

This is a sermon about gender non-conforming, genderqueer, and transgender communities, these may be unfamiliar terms – and that’s ok -- but it is also a sermon about all of us. Because everyone is impacted by that “mythical norm” that makes many of us feel “less than whole, less than beautiful,” as we just sang.

Think back to your childhood -- When you were a child, what expectations were placed on you because you were identified as a boy or a girl? Were you expected to act a certain way? To dress a certain way? To like and dislike certain things? What happened if you did not follow these rules? How were these rules reinforced?

Regardless of what generation we grew up, we've each had a prescribed cage of gender with particular rules – my grandmother couldn't wear pants, my mother was allowed to wear pants in some places, and now Robin can wear whatever she wants but still gets called cute and beautiful more than strong and independent. Robin's male friends still can't or don't wear skirts or dresses, and men are still taught to suppress their feelings and not cry, while women are taught that they must be both beautiful and brilliant to succeed. The rules change, but they still exist.

Folks who are trans, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, genderbending, gender outlaws, gender fluid, agender, demigender, and more – break these gender rules every day. (The terms we use to identify ourselves are always evolving!)

For example, though I get called a lady, as in “Hey ladies,” I don't dress or act as a lady, and I don't like being called a Lady. I wear my hair short enough that I sometimes get called “sir” (which I enjoy), and most of the clothes I wear come from the men's section of stores – you've noticed this! You've never seen me in a dress, though I do enjoy occasionally dressing up in drag with a dress and makeup and the works.

I don't identify as a man or as trans, I identify as mostly-woman and genderqueer – a term that means that I queer gender – that I mess with traditional notions of it, and that I don't fit squarely into categories of “woman” or “man.” My godson calls me “Uncle Cathy,” and that is the best way of naming my gender. In the gender binary system, I am breaking gender rules every day. But if gender is more of a spectrum, then everyone has their place, and my place is simply somewhere in the middle.

At this point in my life, I'm pretty comfortable in this in-between space, but I wasn't always. For most of my twenties, I could get by dressing androgenously in a t-shirt and jeans for most of my twenties, but eventually I had places where I needed to dress up more, and as clothing gets more formal, it gets more clearly defined as Either men's or women's.

When my now sister-in-law asked me to be a bridesmaid in their wedding, I was both honored and horribly anxious. I told her a dress wouldn't work for me, knowing horror stories from friends who are more masculine than I who have, in fact, worn bridesmaid dresses in weddings. The ensuing process to figure out what I could wear that would work for my sister-in-law and for me was excruciating. Formalwear is either men's or women's – so for me, not quite fully comfortable in either, what should I wear?

With just a couple weeks to spare, we came up with a solution that worked for all of us: a custom-made vest in the material of the other bridesmaids' dresses, with a white shirt and black pants – somewhere between what the “women” and “men” were wearing. At the wedding, I was very aware that I didn't fit in with either the men or the women.

Many of you are comfortable in a 3 piece suit or a tux, or a formal dress. You are likely cisgendered – or comfortable in the gender you were assigned at birth. For you, figuring out what to wear to a wedding may not be a big deal.

But Audre Lorde’s mythical norm is true for many folks who are cisgendered too – many of you have a whole variety of stresses and anxieties about what you wear to a wedding – is it the right style? Am I too tall or short or fat for this dress? How can I afford what I am supposed to wear? Does this tie go? Should I wear cuff links? Are these the right shoes? -- There are all sorts of questions about appearance that give many of us anxiety, especially for formal occasions that are based on the “mythical norm” of what a man or a woman looks like -- because and it’s almost always NOT like us – we are too old, too dark, too large, too small, too short, too tall, too-something to fit that norm.

So when I talk about dismantling the gender binary system and about how we create communities of love and respect for transfolks and other gender non conforming people, I know too that we doing that work will open up more space for each and every one of us to be ourselves, our beautiful, unique self.

We all benefit by dismantling the mythical norm and understanding gender as a spectrum.

Leslie Feinberg was a white transgender butch lesbian author & activist who wrote this in their book “Transgender Warriors:” “Both women’s and trans liberation have presented me with 2 important tasks. One is to join the fight to strip away the discriminatory and oppressive values attached to masculinity and femininity; The other is to defend gender freedom - the right of each individual to ambiguity and gender contradiction.”<sup>ii</sup>

Feinberg embodied this ambiguity and contradiction. She wrote: “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” and “hir” to describe myself. I am a person who faces almost insurmountable difficulty when instructed to check off and “f” or an “m” box on identification papers.”<sup>iii</sup>

Stripping away the “discriminatory and oppressive values attached to masculinity and femininity” goes to issues much deeper and more violent than my angst about what to wear to my brother’s wedding.

Feinberg describes having a treatable, yet serious, infection in the 90’s. Sie and hir partner went to the ER with a 104 fever during a snowstorm. “The doctor in charge

began physically examining [hir]. When he determined that [Feinberg's] anatomy was female [though he'd previously assumed Feinberg was male], [the doctor] flashed [Feinberg] a mean-spirited smirk....he told [hir] to get dressed and ...ordered [hir] to leave the hospital and never return.[Sie] refused. [Sie] told him [sie] wouldn't leave until he could tell [hir] why [hir] fever was so high. [The doctor] said 'You have a fever because you are a very troubled person.'

Feinberg writes: "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."<sup>iv</sup>

Feinberg died a year ago today (Nov 15, 2014) at the age of 65 of "complications due to tick-borne infections,"<sup>v</sup> – but really, it was a lifetime of inadequate health care as a workingclass transperson that killed her.

Each year on November 20<sup>th</sup>, communities around the country and globe observe the Transgender Day of Remembrance –a day to "memorialize those who were killed [in the last year] due to anti-transgender hatred or prejudice."<sup>vi</sup> On the back of your order of service are the details about the Hartford vigil on Friday, at which Sarah will be singing the same song you'll soon hear for the Offering. I hope you'll consider coming, or taking a moment on Friday evening to honor these candles of life that were snuffed out long before their time.

The Trans Day of Remembrance includes over seventy people who were murdered in cold blood this year.

And that list is wholly incomplete – it doesn't include Feinberg's name, or all those others in the trans and genderfluid communities who died this year due to hatred and prejudice in health care, due to sustained poverty, or those who took their own lives because it was too hard to make a life where their insides match their outsides (like in our story).

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs found that... transgender people of color were 6 times more likely to experience physical violence from the police, As compared to their peers who are lesbian, gay, bi, and queer people who are not transgender. Transgender people of color are 1.5 times more likely to experience discrimination, 1.5 times more likely to face sexual violence and [almost 2] times more likely to experience bias-based violence in shelters."<sup>vii</sup>

What starts in utero with “is it a boy or a girl?” grows up to be a problem that has a much, much deeper impact on people’s lives than my angst about what to wear to my brother’s wedding.

Let us now remember those who were killed this year – stabbed, shot, run over, and beaten because they broke the gender rules of U.S. society:

*Papi Edwards, 20, Louisville, January 9*

*[Lamia Beard](#), 30, Norfolk on January 17*

*[Ty Underwood](#), 24, Tyler TX on January 26*

*[Yazmin Vash Payne](#), 33, LA on January 31*

*[Taja de Jesus](#), 36, San Fran February 1*

*[Penny Proud](#), 21, New Orleans February 10*

*[Bri Golec](#), 22, Akron on February 13*

*[Kristina Grant Infiniti](#), 47, Miami on February 15*

Keyshia Blige (33 years old)

*[London Chanel](#), 21, Philadelphia on May 18*

*[Mercedes Williamson](#), 17, Alabama on May 30*

*Ashton O’Hara, 25*

*[India Clarke](#), 25, Tampa on July 22*

*[K.C. Haggard](#), 66, Fresno on July 23*

Shade Schuler (22 years old)

*Amber Monroe, 20, Detroit on August 8#SayHerName*

Tamara Dominguez (36 years old)

Kandis Capri (35 years old)<sup>viii</sup>

All vibrant lives. All brutally ended.

Let us say these names.

Let us stand in solidarity with transwomen of color, with poor transmen, with all gender outlaws to create a culture of love and pride across the gender spectrum.

As white queer UU theologian and favorite professor of mine Rebecca Parker writes: “We cannot love after the fact and expect love to be able to save life....If we can learn to love first, not last, then love may save us.”

Let us love first.

Let us open our hearts to more gender diversity than we have ever experienced.

Let us be open to thinking in entirely new ways and start thinking outside the gender binary. Let us each allow our own genders to be a bit more fluid.

Let us learn together how to do this – bringing our questions, our ignorance, ideas, insecurities, fears, excitement, imagination, and most of all, our love for life.

Because we are all limited by the “mythical norm” of what it means to be a man or a woman, and because we love life too much to allow it to be squandered or stomped out simply because of gender transgressions.

Let us love first, and let us love last.

And, as Mother Jones said, let us mourn the dead and fight like hell for the living.

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<sup>i</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” In *Sister Outsider*, 116.

<sup>ii</sup> *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg, p. 103

<sup>iii</sup> *Transliberation*, Leslie Feinberg, p1.

<sup>iv</sup> *TransLiberation*, Feinberg, p.2

<sup>v</sup> Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leslie\\_Feinberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leslie_Feinberg)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://tdor.info/about-2/>

<sup>vii</sup> HRC, <http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/mourning-kandis-capri-the-16th-transgender-person-killed-in-2015>, statistics from 2013, quote reworked with the same info

<sup>viii</sup> Source: tdor.info and <http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2015/08/rip-amber-monroe.html>