

THERE'S A PLACE FOR US

Hi. I'm Aaron, and I use they/them/their pronouns. If you aren't familiar, here's how you might use "they" pronouns in a sentence. "This is my friend Aaron, and they identify as transgender, nonbinary, and queer." You may also recognize me as the person who holds the "Ask a Transgender Person" sign at farm markets around Central Vermont. I want to invite Brenda Churchill to stand. Brenda is the statehouse liaison for the LGBTQIA Alliance of Vermont—that's the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, intersex, and asexual Alliance. She and I will be in the Fireplace Room after the service with our sign. Please stop in and ask us questions. We invite anyone who identifies broadly as trans to sit with us as well. Brenda and I also invite questions and dialogue *any* time. We do this project *so that others don't have to*—please never assume that others want to talk to you about their trans experiences.

Two years ago, I started this project because most Vermonters don't believe they personally know someone who is transgender, and even most of those who do, still can't define "transgender." So how *do* we define it? Transgender is a broad term that includes an incredibly diverse group of experiences. A person who is transgender simply doesn't fully identify with their sex assigned at birth. I could be assigned female at birth and identify as male. In my case, I was assigned male at birth and I identify as not fully female nor fully male. A subset of transgender folks like myself identify as nonbinary, which is another umbrella term that just means that I don't fit neatly in the gender binary of female or male. Most non-binary people identify as transgender as well. And since gender is complicated, and to a large extent culturally defined, a person's gender expression that you see, and the gender identity that they feel at their core don't have to match up, and that's okay too.

Perhaps you were assigned female at birth, but you are drawn to pursue things that in your culture are thought of as "masculine" things, such as studying computer programming, or, if you lived here 100 years ago, going to college and pursuing a professional degree. You might identify as transgender, but more likely you identify as a gender non-conforming woman—and you would face some of the same challenges and roadblocks as transgender people face.

I know...that was a lot. And if you hear other words you don't know, feel free to ask after the service. From the outside, it may really feel like an overwhelming number of new and evolving terms to learn, and while these terms will continue to evolve and sort themselves out, here's why I find this all so exciting. This is the *first time* in centuries of western history that transgender, intersex, and non-binary people get to *define ourselves*, rather than leaving it to prisons, religious institutions, mental institutions, circus sideshows and white cis-gender heterosexual medical doctors—and *that* feels liberating. We are now sharing our own experiences.

When I was 5, long before the word nonbinary existed, I knew I didn't fit well in the girl and boy boxes. When I was 7, I told my mom that I wanted to be a girl, but my mom told me that wasn't an option, and, besides, I'd have to spend hours primping my hair, and did I really want *that*? Not really. When I was about 9, I told my mom I wanted to be a castrato. Castrati were Italian singers castrated during childhood to preserve their voices. That didn't go over so well either. A trapped feeling set in. When I was 17, my body was hardly producing any testosterone, my voice remained high, I was asexual. And my doctor and my parents were concerned that my voice wasn't dropping—not that any actual harm was happening, but they were afraid I would be teased and disrespected for my whole life. This is the only time in my life I went against every instinct in my gut. I abandoned myself and I followed the advice of the well-meaning adults around me, thinking I just had to "man up"—prove to everyone I could be...something else, someone else. I went on a high dose of testosterone for a year. I broke out in heavy acne, my bone structure changed, my voice changed but stayed in the alto range for another 5 years—that's still where I feel most comfortable singing. At 17, I happened on some trans literature, and I realized I wasn't alone. For my next 5 years from Wyoming to Vermont, with a high voice, and little facial hair, I was read interchangeably

as “she,” as “he” or as “ma’am—I mean sir.” I felt comfortable in this ambiguity, but it soon got exhausting being the first publicly non-binary person most acquaintances had met.

I’ve been talking mostly about gender so far, which is defined more by culture. I’m going to talk about sex, which is defined more by biology. Intersex: Intersex is an umbrella term for natural bodily variations in sex characteristics at birth that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. Most people think of variations in chromosomes, but intersex usually also refers more broadly to variations in genitals, hormones and/or gonads—and recent studies suggest that somewhere around 1.7% of people are intersex by this broader definition. In some cases, intersex traits are visible at birth while in others, they are not apparent until puberty. Since I don’t know what my body would have become if I hadn’t gone on testosterone, it’s not entirely clear if I fit in the box of intersex, but I’ve grown to accept this ambiguity. It can be a beautiful thing to choose to take hormone blockers or hormones as a teenager with informed consent. It’s another to be coerced to.

You may be hoping I’m going to talk just about me. But that’s not where change is going to happen. It’s going to happen when we as a community fully embrace transgender people--and in so doing, *embrace all parts of ourselves*.

For centuries in our western culture, we’ve been taught that transgender people are freaks of nature who have nothing to teach us. Trans people have plenty to teach us—about *gender policing*—and how it hurts *all* of us. It’s probably not something most of us give much thought to, but it’s everywhere in our daily culture—we do it to each other without realizing.

How many times were you told as a child, implicitly or explicitly, that “*men don’t cry*”?--when crying is actually an important tool that we humans have for healing, resilience, and connection. We make *confining assumptions* about people *based on how we perceive their genders*. For women, it’s one thing to shave our legs because we enjoy it—but it’s because of gender policing that some women shave their legs simply to avoid harsh judgement by others. And while trans people are probably the most hurt, brutalized and killed by gender policing in our communities, it actually hurts everyone. And it makes it harder for all of us to have relationships. *Raise your hand if you can think of a time you’ve been gender policed*.

How can we create a community in which boys and men know we have permission to cry? To hug, to be held, have emotions, and close friendships? What are we doing to make sure that women and girls are allowed spiritually to connect with the *power of our anger, to be uncontained, to be heard*? What are we doing to create a church in which transgender humans are seen as authentic individuals? Trans and non-binary humans are changing our world, creating a world that has more gender equity, safety, inclusion, compassionate listening, and community. *There is a place for us*.

A well-known 2014 study by the Williams Institute and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention found that transgender folks in the US are *nine times* as likely to attempt suicide in their lives than the rest of the population. And research also shows that when discrimination is replaced with support, transgender folks have a pretty similar suicide rate to everyone else. I wish I could say Vermont does significantly better than this, but so far, I haven’t seen that reflected in any statistics. And among Vermont’s challenges is rural isolation; I can go days without seeing someone like myself, and sometimes that’s hard. This may sound harsh, but we all participate in the suicides of our trans community members. Espinoza’s words: “There were words that did this. There were hands and guns.”

Or we can help prevent the self-harm of our trans community members. We can do this everyday in so many different ways once we *notice* who isn’t being included. Simply by being actively

supportive to the trans community, calling trans people in our community by their chosen names and pronouns, making sure that spaces are inclusive and welcoming for us, you are probably actually saving lives by preventing future suicide attempts. Seriously.

I'm privileged and lucky for a trans person, so please don't start thinking I represent all trans people. I grew up white and middle class, and I was never abused. I was raised by fairly accepting Unitarian parents. And while I wasn't suicidal, I was seriously depressed in my mid-teen years, and my self-esteem was measured to be at the bottom first percentile. Here are the 3 things that led to my lack of self-esteem: 1) Coming of age as a queer person in a world that judged me as immoral, perverted, a sissy, a faggot. 2) Coming of age as a trans/non-binary person in a world that didn't make space for me—not even fully in the broader queer community. 3) Having a learning disability....Intersectionality. *That* is what intersectionality can look like. The term was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to show how intersecting oppressions can multiply impacts on people who are *African-American* and also *women*. And since then, it's been applied to many types of overlapping oppressions.

I believe that we humans are resilient creatures, but at some point, we all hit a breaking point—trying to cross the road at the intersection of 3 highways. With nobody to help us find the way, it can feel like a suicide mission. But it doesn't have to be like that. There's a place for us. It is born out of compassionate community. If it weren't for the love and support I received from my parents, friends, and members of my community, I would not be here today. *Can you be that for other trans folks in our communities?*

An important survey of trans* UUs came out in January: The TrUUst report—issued by the group: Transgender Religious professional Unitarian Universalists Together. They surveyed 278 trans UU individuals around the world. The results are online, and downstairs. They found that: “72% of trans UUs do not feel as though their congregation is completely inclusive of them as trans people.” And that number hits 85% for Trans U.U.s of color. And in fact the most common reason for leaving a congregation was trans-related marginalization, followed by other intersecting oppressions such as racism, classism, ableism, or ageism. As one survey respondent wrote, “My congregation talks a good game about fighting oppression but turns down every opportunity to walk the walk...It became too exhausting to try to attend a congregation full of privileged people who want ally points without doing any of the work.” What saddens me is that I know so many trans people who have a thirst for community, for meaningful connection, and it's hard to find inclusive spaces like this in our society.

This was a global survey, and I would believe that *our* church has done more of this work than some. I know that *I* want--*you all* want for me--to pat you on the back and tell you what a great job we are doing being a welcoming congregation. But I can't do that honestly, because I see that we could be doing more. It might seem an overwhelming task to address housing discrimination, homelessness, job discrimination, poverty, and intersecting forms of oppression that so many in our trans community face. On the other hand, I know *we* can decrease our unacceptably high trans suicide rate—I'm certain of it. We can educate ourselves, we can get used to being uncomfortable. We can learn to have conversations about gender, stumble, correct ourselves. We can open our hearts and our minds. We can breathe; we can listen. And we can build a more loving community.

So I invite you to roll up your sleeves with me; we've got work to do. There's a place for us.

--Aaron Marcus March 2019