

“Becoming Who We Are”

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Meriden, CT

November 20, 2016
Transgender Day of Remembrance

When my firstborn daughter was 12, she went through the Jewish rite of passage known as a bat mitzvah. Translated from the Hebrew it means “daughter of the commandment”. Mitzvah is also translated as good deed, as in “That was a mitzvah that you did!” Any rite of passage is intended to be transformative. Now you may be wondering how a Unitarian Universalist minister has a daughter who went through this rite of passage that is definitively Jewish. It’s complicated, and more so since Shana’s bat mitzvah was at the Abraham Joshua Heschel Synagogue in Manhattan. Years earlier I had studied with this great late 20th century rabbi. Heschel had been a visiting scholar at Union Theological Seminary, and I breathed in the wisdom of this prophet, who also became a shining light for Clergy Against the War in Vietnam. Are you confused yet? I offer you these specifics from my own life to illustrate the fluidity of our identities and how our identities flow not always in the same direction with those we love.

That a rite of passage is transformative, that identities are commonly fluid and in variant directions, ground the poem that I wrote to Shana as a gift marking this rite of passage and her unfolding identity. “You are becoming who you are!” She was becoming who she is. So was I; so am I; so are you, each of you.

At our birth, it’s common that the first ray of who we are is communicated as what we are. Is the baby a boy or a girl? Perhaps the answer is yes, neither, or both. Appearances can be deceiving. As our youngsters discovered earlier this morning, a flower that appears blue on its outer petals may be quite pink inside; and a flower that appears pink on its outer petals may be quite blue inside. That is, a baby girl may blossom in ways that belie external appearances. If she knows in the DNA of her heart that she is really a he, who’s to deny this?

What a gift it is to become who you are, and if medical science can help this along, so much the better. Being true to the DNA of our hearts is being true to ourselves. This is integrity. This is wholeness. Hear again the words of the prayer of my friend and colleague, Sean Parker Dennison, offered earlier by Cindy:

“Help us understand that our longing to be whole and tell the truth of who we are is holy.”

Becoming who we are is a rite of passage that is transformative from the inside out and in turn frees us to transform our world in the direction of wholeness. Again, Sean’s words resonate:

“Help us transform the world by being ourselves and understanding the deep need for every person to have the freedom, safety, and support to do the same.”

Transgender identity assumes a passage in which a beautiful baby blossoms into the essence of that child's heart—physically, psychologically, spiritually. Some of us discover that we're neither male nor female, but what we might call "omnigender". For those among us who find such gender fluidity disconcerting, imagine what it's like for those among us who were born into a body that doesn't feel authentic. Why would anyone else be so bent out of shape by the drive toward wholeness that we would visit violence against another human being committed to becoming whole?

Monica, Jasmine, Maya, Demarkis, Amos, Jazz, Brandi, and all 25 of the individuals whom we named this morning were simply becoming who they were. Those who murdered them surely did so out of intense discomfort with their own gender identities, a discomfort that manifested itself in fear that escalated into the violence of taking a life. If each of us could hold up a mirror to the DNA of our hearts, what a gender fluid species we would see.

On this Transgender Day of Remembrance, may we gaze upon these candles, each burning for a life that is precious, each with a flame rising, each recalling one among us courageous enough to trust a DNA beyond appearances at birth.

Become who you are. Trust your longing to be whole and to tell the truth of who you are and are becoming. Know that your journey is a pilgrimage and your path is sacred.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Sean Parker Dennison, "Spirit of Infinite Love," in "We Pray: Prayers to and For the Transgender Community," <https://thoughtsonblank.com/we-pray-prayers-to-and-for-the-transgender-community/>.