

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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Cisgender People Trying to Be Transgender Allies

Good morning.

Today I want to talk about transgender rights and transgender issues, about welcoming transgender and nonbinary people in our UU congregations, and specifically about the dialogue that's taking place in this denomination, Unitarian Universalism. I also want to talk about the importance of being an ally and the challenge of being an ally. Therefore I'll begin with defining these terms, "ally" and "transgender."

Defining "Ally"

In war, an ally is someone fighting for one side or the other who is not a direct party to the conflict. In social justice, an ally is a member of a privileged group, usually a majority, fighting for the rights and safety and recognition of an oppressed group, usually a minority. Therefore we see people who identify as white fighting against racism, trying to be allies to people of color. And what I'm talking about today is cisgender people trying to be allies to transgender people.

The key thing, however, is that an ally can only be—or should only be—in service of the group in the fight. In the example of war, if an army decides to be an ally and shows up on the battlefield and starts fighting, without taking direction from the army that's already in the fight, they are likely to do as much harm as good. And in social justice, when people of privileged majorities show up and start fighting for what they believe the oppressed minority group wants or needs—without being in conversation with them, without taking direction from them—we also can do harm as well as good.

So my whole point today, which I'll illustrate with a recent example in our denomination of Unitarian Universalism, is that cisgender people (like myself) who want to be allies to transgender people need to listen first and not assume that we know what is the right thing to do.

Defining Transgender and Nonbinary

Next I will try to define the terms transgender and cisgender. I identify as cisgender, which means a person whose gender expression matches their biological birth gender. For example, someone who is born biologically as a male and lives in the world as a boy or a man is cisgender.

The way I'm using the term transgender today, it is a blanket term to mean someone who is not cisgender, and it includes many sub-categories. Someone who is born biologically as one sex but changes their body through hormones and/or surgery would be transgender; someone who expresses their gender differently from their biological sex might identify as cross-dresser or as transgender (the terms are sometimes fluid and overlapping). Someone who expresses their gender in ways that don't fit the societal norms of either male or female might identify as gender-fluid or gender non-binary or genderqueer.

Let me pause here because, as a cisgender man, I am not part of the transgender community and therefore everything I just said is my understanding of another group – a group with important and probably sensitive differences from myself – from the outside looking in. I may have already made a mistake in my language or my framing of the transgender community that someone within that community would find inaccurate or insensitive.

Actually, that is exactly what happened earlier this year.

Problematic UU World Article

There is a quarterly publication of the Unitarian Universalist Association called the *UU World*. I get it home, as I'm sure many of you do as well, and we have copies of it here at the Fellowship. In the Spring 2019 issue of the *UU World* there was an article about transgender issues that caused quite an uproar. The title of the article was "After L, G, and B" and the author was Kimberly French.¹ Of course, "after L, G, and B" comes T for transgender. Often we say LGBT for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, or LGBTQ for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer.

The article was written by a cisgender woman and it described her attempt to be an ally to transgender people. In the article, the author told some stories about encountering trans people in her family and in her church, emphasizing the author's struggles to understand the complicated world of transgender and nonbinary people—complicated to her, and foreign to her.

People from the trans community reacted strongly and negatively to the article. They found the author to be insensitive in her language and her perspective. Soon after the criticism of the article, there were a series of apologies: by the author herself, by the editor of the magazine, and even by the president of the UUA.

As I read the articles and the criticism, the main problem is that it centered the voice and experience, the struggle to understand the other, of a cisgender woman. It did not center the voices of trans and nonbinary people. And the most damning thing that I found it is that trans people were consulted prior to publication and they basically said, *Don't do this. Don't publish an article that's all about a cisgender person's perspective without including a trans perspective.*² And yet that's exactly what was published. And I'm sure that the author is a well-meaning person! But I agree that it was a mistake not to center the voices of transgender people.

For the rest of my time this morning, that's what I would like to do.

Trans UU Voices

The subsequent issue of the *UU World*, in addition to carrying the apologies of the editor and the author, features a montage of six pieces by UU trans and nonbinary clergy and lay people. One of them, Rev. Sean Parker Denison, points out that the key problem in the original article is the notion that "this is new for us, this is hard." Rev. Sean writes:

I began to notice that one deep assumption connected each mistake with the next: the assumption that we are just beginners at all this "trans stuff". And as I heard people respond with "But it's all so new...how can you expect us to get it right?" and "Don't shame people for not knowing better," I remembered when I'd heard it before.

I've heard it when someone asked that others stop relying on words and metaphors that exclude disabled people. I've heard it when white UUs have been asked to practice decentering whiteness and include voices and practices that honor black people, indigenous people, and/or people of color. I've heard it when discussing the possibility of updating a reading that was written before inclusive language became standard. I've heard it when I ask my mother again, after twenty-two years, to call me by my name and use my correct pronoun. Whenever I or any of my friends and beloveds ask for real change that challenges the norms and traditions of Unitarian Universalist culture, I hear the refrain: "We are new at this! It is too hard! It disrupts everything and makes me uncomfortable!"³

This criticism hits home for me because I have guilty of that kind of thinking: that all this “trans stuff” is hard for me and I need more time. The truth is, for me and for other cisgender people, that it’s time for me to do the work and to and learn what I need to learn.

Advice for Cisgender People: We Can Do This

Another resource that I found gives me some encouragement and some advice on how to do this. The source here is the Transforming Hearts Collective and the author is Alex Kapitan. They offer a list of bullet points titled “advice for cisgender people: we can do this.” Here are some of the points from that list

- Believe trans people
- Listen more than you talk
- Be willing to remain in discomfort
- Have hard conversations, with love
- Value relationships over perfectionism
- Don’t expect every trans person to want to educate you, but honor those who do
- Don’t ask a trans person anything you wouldn’t ask a cis person
- Uplift trans voices⁴

The point about not expecting trans people to educate me is an important point for me...just like, as a man, I don’t expect women to educate me about patriarchy and misogyny, but I honor those who do. Finally, the advice of lifting up trans voices is what I’m trying to do in this sermon today.

Using Pronouns

One of the things that is an important cultural shift in welcoming transgender and nonbinary people is to use correct pronouns. I can’t assume that someone wants to be called “he” or “she” by the way the person looks to me. And some people don’t want to be called either he or she, but might prefer “they.” Some UU congregations are embracing this by inviting everyone to put little stickers on their name tags to indicate which pronouns they prefer – cisgender people and transgender people alike, so that it is something that is just part of the culture.

Sinclair Sexsmith is a blogger who identifies as queer nonbinary, and here is what they wrote about this:

*Dear cis people who put your pronouns on your “hello my name is” name tags: **Thank you.***

When you do that, I feel more comfortable putting my pronouns — they/them. I feel more comfortable being visibly out as nonbinary. I feel more comfortable asking people to use the pronouns that feel most like me, that make me feel most seen and whole, instead of just resolving to be mis-gendered and misrepresented ...

*When we’re doing the socializing part of whatever event we’re at, and we are introduced, I automatically feel warmer toward you — regardless of your gender or presentation. I feel much more comfortable talking to you, because you already tell me you know a little about gender.
Thank you.*

Later in the same article, Sexsmith continues:

If you don’t know someone’s pronouns, ask!

This is an important skill to cultivate. We have probably all heard this, but there are plenty of times we — all of us, myself included — feel awkward asking, and so we don't. But it's never too late — ask at any point during the conversation.

It's not a faux pas if you have to stop in the middle of a sentence, just ask.

"Sorry, what are your pronouns?"

"Oh I didn't get your pronouns, what are they?"

"Will you remind me your pronouns please?"

If you mess up, no big deal. We all do.⁵

Blessed be the words of Sinclair Sexsmith.

Identity and Othering and Embracing Difference

There's one other author I want to uplift, and I have a longer quotation here that will conclude my sermon. The author is Alex Kapitan, and Alex uses the pronoun "ze." I love this quote because it's about the core of Unitarian Universalism. Alex points out that all of us have our own truth, and that embracing one another's differences is what we're all about as UU's. Isn't that exactly what we do in this congregation? We live into the truth that we are stronger together, in all our diversity. These are the words of Alex Kapitan, what ze calls "Queering Faith:"

...in order to tap into our super power as a religion, we can't just coexist without meaningfully engaging with each other's truths. We can't gloss over our differences and expect that they will never affect our relationships or our community.

Queering faith means turning social conventions upside down. It means actively talking about our different beliefs, deeply sharing the practices that make each of us feel connected and grounded, and experiencing joy and wonder in how different they are. My queer faith teaches me that my truth does not depend on you having the same truth. That when both of us can live from a place of truth—different truths!—when both of us can come fully alive from those places of truth, then both of us will be free.

It's incredibly vulnerable to share the truths and practices that live close to our hearts and souls. It can be incredibly uncomfortable to try to understand something foreign or embrace the fact that something that feels constricting or painful to you makes another person feel freer.

Yet to me, this is what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. It's only by taking these risks that we can tear down the walls between us, challenge what we have been served up by mainstream culture, and truly be in relationship with one another. Together we can queer our faith and choose a different path. Toward justice. Toward healing. Toward life.⁶

In the name and faith of all those gathered here, may it be so, today and always.

¹French, Kimberly, *After L, G, and B*. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/after-l-g-b>

²Kapitan, Alex, *What It Takes to De-Center Privilege*. <https://rootsgrowthetree.com/2019/03/06/what-it-takes-to-de-center-privilege/>

³ Dennison, Sean Parker, *Time to Learn*. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/time-learn>

⁴ <https://www.transformingheartscollective.org/stories/2019/3/8/tips-for-talking-about-the-uu-world-article>

⁵Sexsmith, Sinclair, *Dear Cis People Who Put Your Pronouns on Your Hello-My-Name-Is Nametags*. <https://lgbt.10ztalk.com/2019/04/20/dear-cis-people-who-put-your-pronouns-on-your-hello-my-name-is-nametags/>

⁶Kapitan, Alex, *Queering Faith*. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/queering-faith>