

## After L, G, and B

Listening to transgender and nonbinary people is about respect, relationship, and whether we can be a truly inclusive faith.  
BY [KIMBERLY FRENCH](#) | 3/1/2019 | UU World Magazine, [SPRING 2019](#)

Jenn\* and Sydney\* exchanged a look, across the dinner table from me. I knew instantly that I'd misgendered Sydney again. But how? How could I have possibly used "he" or "him" with Sydney sitting right in front of me?

Sydney was my daughter's girlfriend at the time, back in 2013. When I first met her, Sydney was transitioning from the male gender she was assigned at birth to female. My daughter Jenn identifies as cisgender, meaning she sees herself as the same gender as the one on her birth certificate.

Sydney is a super-smart computer programmer, with long thick brunette hair, who enjoys wearing skirts and dresses that she sews herself, contra dancing, and following the author/vlogger John Green (as do I). But my brain interpreted her facial features and body type as male. Hard as I tried, I was constantly messing up. Unfairly, it felt to me, the more comfortable I got around Sydney, the more often I messed up.

I'd always thought my cred as a gay ally was pretty good. I wrote in my high school paper in the 1970s about a new gay community center near my conservative midwestern suburb, challenging my classmates to stop making faggot jokes and get behind gay rights. Before marriage equality, my straight male partner and I had a union ceremony, without a marriage license, in part because we didn't want to be part of a club that excluded our gay loved ones. Like many people in my Welcoming Congregation, the letters LGBT flow trippingly off my tongue. But in recent years I keep stumbling after B.

I started meeting more and more folks who identified as trans when my daughters came of age and I got to know their friends. One day I asked Jenn: "So if Sydney is a trans woman, and you're female, do you think of yourself as gay or straight?" "Neither" was her answer. Jenn identifies as pansexual, but she's OK with queer or bisexual, too. She has dated people who identify as trans men, trans women, genderqueer, and cis men. As I tried to sort this out, I started to get how terribly confining binary labels are—female/male, gay/straight—and how useful a word like queer is.

As their relationship continued, I got bold enough to ask Jenn some other questions I'd been wondering about: "Is Sydney taking hormones? Is she planning to have surgery?"

A little shock crossed Jenn's face. "You really can't ask about that. The only thing you can ask is which pronoun someone prefers."

It was my turn to register shock. How could I get to know someone if their pronoun was all I could ask about something so central to who they were?

"I wish Bryce\* had lived to see what's happened in the past eight years," my 74-year-old friend Claire\* was saying to me one night after choir rehearsal. Claire's late wife was born intersex—with both male and female genitals. Doctors and family in the 1950s decided to surgically remove the baby's male parts and raise her as a girl. Bryce had been a beloved member of our church, singing bass in the choir and working as a handyperson. I still think of her often when I see her clever fixes in my old farmhouse where nothing is level, plumb, square, or true. Bryce would have liked to have lived as a man, Claire says. Because the couple didn't have the means for surgery, they never considered it. Bryce's story would have unfolded so differently today.

Claire says she herself was "always right down the middle"—from the time she was a little girl, crestfallen she couldn't go from Brownies into Boy Scouts; as a young woman, amazed any man would want her, falling into a disastrous marriage; then divorcing and calling herself lesbian most of her life. Finally, she's found an identity—queer—that gets it right for her.

The movement for the rights of transgender and other nonbinary identities feels like it's hurtled through our culture at lightning speed. "It's not just you," Claire tells me. "All sorts of people, whether they call themselves gay, lesbian, queer, or trans, are finding they have blind spots they didn't know they had."

People who do not fit neatly into the female/male and gay/straight binaries have always been in the world. We see them in records and images from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as accounts of two-spirit people in Native tribes on this continent. But the term transgender came into use only in the 1990s, replacing words like transsexual, transvestite, and cross-dresser. An estimated 1.4 million Americans now identify as transgender, about 0.6 percent of the U.S. adult population, according to a [2016 survey](#) by the Williams Institute of the UCLA School of Law. Medical professionals recognize "ambiguous genitalia" as a condition and perform so-called corrective surgery on one to two of every thousand

live births. But many sex variations in genes, hormones, and internal reproductive organs don't show up until later in life. Taking all these variations together, the number of live births that don't fit into an "ideal male or female" binary may be [as high as 2 percent](#), according to researchers including Brown University sexologist Anne Fausto-Sterling.

In the late twentieth century those who could afford it could change not just their presentation to match their gender, but also their bodies, with an array of medical procedures: hormone therapy; genital reconstruction; facial feminization and Adam's apple surgeries; silicone implants; liposuction; plastic surgery; and hair transplants or removal. Early on, some doctors required people to "pass" for a year or two before they would perform medical transition procedures, or told them to leave their families and move to a new place where no one knew them.

What really revolutionized the trans movement was not medicine but the Internet. Ten to twenty years ago people questioning their gender often knew no one like themselves. But with the Internet, trans people could look up information anonymously. They could talk to others struggling with the same feelings. They could find the courage to transition. In *The Lives of Transgender People*, social scientists Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin quote Tina, who had cross-dressed for forty years: "I learned from reading, but I was liberated by the Internet."

The last decade has seen another big shift, less about passing and more about pride. Some trans people may feel surgery or other medical treatments complete their transition. Others may want to change only how they present and interact socially. Some, like Sydney, want to be as masculine or feminine as possible in dress, hair, makeup, and manner. Others, like Claire, say a spectrum isn't even a good metaphor for how they feel and may identify as *genderfluid* or *genderqueer*. The past two years have ratcheted up the stakes in the fight for rights and acceptance of people with these identities. In 2017 President Trump called for a ban on transgender people in the military (provoking several ongoing court challenges), and thirty states [introduced 129 bills](#) that would have denied LGBTQ rights in a variety of ways. Only twelve of those bills became law, but opponents of trans rights are pressing on. Two Sundays before the 2018 midterm elections, the Department of Health and Human Services leaked a memo that it was seeking to legally define gender as a biological, immutable condition: You are what's on your birth certificate unless you can prove otherwise by genetic testing. The news felt like an assault—especially for intersex folks—reversing federal policies that gave legal recognition to transgender persons.

Within hours the hashtag #WontBeErased roared through social media. The very night the news broke, trans activists mobilized a demonstration in New York City, the next night at the White House. The energy was quickly harnessed to getting LGBTQ voters and their allies to the polls in November. [Close to 400](#) openly LGBTQ candidates were on ballots across the country in 2018—twenty-two for U.S. House or Senate and four for governor—and more than 160 LGBTQ candidates nationwide were elected to office. Transgender rights for the first time were put to a statewide vote: Massachusetts voters approved a referendum, 68 percent to 32 percent, to uphold a bill that protects transgender residents from discrimination in "public accommodations," including stores, hotels, and bathrooms.

The fight feels like a swinging pendulum, or even like a wrecking ball: campaign then pushback, victory then backlash. And trans activists feel LGBTQ gains don't evenly benefit them.

"It's been exhausting, and painful, and terrifying in a lot of ways," says Alex Kapitan, educator, activist, co-leader of the [Transforming Hearts Collective](#), and steering committee member of [TRUUsT](#), an organization of UU trans religious professionals. "The stakes are high right now because of increasing violence targeting trans people and the way our president has emboldened violent actors in the public."

In 2017 an LGBTQ American was reported murdered in hate-related violence an average of once a week—an [86 percent increase in single-incident reports](#) over 2016, according to the Anti-Violence Project. The overwhelming majority of the victims were transgender women of color (40 percent) and gay men (38 percent). The data collected in 2018 also show transgender women of color as the primary victims of hate crimes against LGBT people.

Quality-of-life statistics for trans people are grim in just about any category you can think of: suicide, depression, homelessness, poverty, policing, trauma, assault, incarceration, harassment, disability, and job and housing discrimination. Trans people are nine times more likely to have attempted suicide than the general population, for example, and three times more likely to be unemployed, according to a [2015 survey](#) of more than 27,000 people, representing every state, by the National Center for Transgender Equality.

It's precisely because of those demographic factors that Unitarian Universalism is failing trans people, Kapitan says. Our congregations have done a good job of welcoming gay and lesbian people who look like the majority UU culture: white,

able-bodied, well-educated, financially comfortable, monogamously partnered. But UU culture doesn't overlap much with trans culture.

"The thing that is most painful to me," Kapitan continues, "is the mythology that we have 'arrived' as a faith when it comes to LGBTQ welcome and inclusion: 'Look, we helped with marriage equality. Aren't we the best place for LGBTQ people looking for a faith home?' But that's not the experience of trans UUs. A lot of trans people in the wake of Trump's election have sought out spiritual support for the first time in a while, or in a new way, but I can't tell them that they can go to their local UU congregation for support."

A [survey](#) of 278 trans UUs, published in January by TRUUST, found that 72 percent do not feel their congregation is completely inclusive of them. They point to a lack of pronoun awareness and bathroom accessibility, as well as to disparaging comments, gendered language in worship, and just plain awkward social interactions.

In November TRUUST issued a call to action to all UUs (see page 36). For congregations, the ask is to make your next move, whatever it is. Pronoun awareness and gender-neutral bathrooms are baseline, like wheelchair ramps. Inclusion doesn't stop there. If you don't know what your next move is, ask trans members of your congregation or larger community.

"Being radically welcoming is a spiritual practice, not a static identity," Kapitan says. "The most important call we have theologically, in my opinion, is to create and practice Beloved Community that includes everybody."

Last Thanksgiving I was preparing to host twelve people, and it struck me: the only people I knew for sure identified as cisgender and straight were my conservative evangelical mother in her 80s, my husband Michael, and me. Also coming to our table were Jenn and her trans friend Andy\*; Claire; my brother and his husband; and my college-age daughter and three of her friends.

My brother and I were concerned how this might go down with our mother. Both of us have had our clashes—still do—with our mom over feminism, homosexuality, gender roles, and our own marriage choices, and we've all had to work at our relationships. We especially wanted to make sure neither our mom nor Jenn's friend Andy would be uncomfortable.

Jenn had texted her grandmother a picture of the two of them, and her grandmother regularly asked about her "man friend." Jenn thought it might just slip by. My brother and I were doubtful. With so many good midwestern manners in the room—including Andy's—we figured we'd be the ones hammered with questions . . . later.

Jenn dutifully called her grandmother, explaining that Andy uses the pronouns "they/them." She also schooled my brother, me, and our spouses in some Gender 101 that might help us field questions: "Gender is complicated and has four parts that don't always align for everybody: body, gender role, presentation, and what you know to be true about yourself."

Mostly the long weekend went beautifully: thoughtful readings and reflections before the big meal, good food, games, movies, conversations, and laughter. Two little conversations stood out as a bit different.

One afternoon, I happened on Jenn, Andy, and Michael at the dining room table discussing *Stone Butch Blues*, a heart-wrenching semiautobiographical novel by Leslie Feinberg that has become an icon of the trans movement, about a working-class butch lesbian in 1970s Buffalo, New York.

"It was so painful," Michael was saying. "Every chapter took my breath away. Her life was so hard, blow after blow after blow. The nonacceptance of her parents . . . and she had to be on guard with everyone all the time—her factory coworkers, people on the street cursing at her, other lesbians, even her girlfriend."

"It was really cool and useful that Michael had read the book," Andy told me later. "He had an understanding of how incredibly complex gender can be, that it defines your life whether you want it to or not. It's hard to talk about what's important to me as a whole person when I'm surrounded by people who don't have that understanding."

Another evening Andy and I were playing Spades as partners, against Jenn and my mom. Jenn bid, then Andy, and it was my mom's turn.

"What did she bid?" my mom asked Jenn, meaning Andy.

A little later, same question, different hand. Andy and Jenn pretended to be doodling on the score sheet, but secretly they were writing notes: "Want me to say something?" "You can say something or I will."

The next deal Andy took a bathroom break, and I headed to the kitchen for snacks. “Is she vegetarian?” I heard Jenn’s grandmother ask.

“Actually, Andy uses the pronoun ‘they,’” Jenn tried. “So you would say: ‘Are they vegetarian?’”

“So is she vegetarian or vegan? What’s the difference, again?”

“No, I’m trying to explain the grammar about the pronoun.”

“Could you write that down for me?”

Andy returned. Jenn’s grandmother didn’t miss a beat: “So Jenn was telling me what you are . . .”

“Yeah, so I use the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them,’ but you can also use ‘he.’”

“No, she was telling me about your eating.”

Andy looked confused.

“That you’re some sort of vegetarian? When did you become vegetarian?”

Andy gamely explained that they’d had a medical condition that made it difficult to chew meat. By the time it was corrected, vegetarianism had become a way of life. My mom happily followed along that medical journey, asking more questions.

These delicate interactions, the sticky relationships among family, friends, and anyone we count as our community are about so much more than pronouns.

Using the right pronoun or name is a baby step, a simple sign of respect. In my lifetime I’ve made numerous changes in language: from *Negro* to *black* to *African American* to *people of color*; from *handicapped* to *disabled* to *differently abled* to calling myself *temporarily abled*. Consciousness about gendered language has been important to me, too, insisting on “he or she” as a young copy editor. Today I’m the chair, not the chairman, of a town board. It makes a big difference to me.

Rather than trying to override both my internal gender binary *and* editor, often unsuccessfully, I’ve adopted a strategy of repeating someone’s name, even every sentence, and throwing in various passive-voice constructions. I’ve been well-schooled that if I do mess up, anything more than a quick correction or “Sorry” before moving on is annoying. But I’m messing up a lot less.

I’ve also learned that the trans and nonbinary people I know—and we all likely know more than we think—cannot be my only resource. It’s exhausting for them and doesn’t allow a relationship to grow on equal ground. We’ve all got to do our homework . . . at home.

When I know someone well, someone who knows I genuinely care about them, I believe I can ask more than their pronoun. I’ve got to take cues about how much they want to say, the same way I might respond to anyone disclosing, say, their love life, a medical condition, deep feelings, or any personal matter. Use my good midwestern manners, in other words. Claire’s and my lives have become so closely intertwined: I lean on her to get my note in choir, we’ve gone to political demonstrations and canvassed together countless times, we talk several times a week, even walk each other’s dogs. But only recently have I learned key details about Bryce’s and her story. As she’s reminded me of tentative questions I’ve asked over the years, I felt a twinge of regret that I didn’t make more room for some of that intimate sharing much earlier in our lives.

I don’t need to figure out if what people I care about are asking me to do is logical or grammatical, or effective in changing the culture, or even if it fits into the frames I believe in. For cisgender people like me, firmly rooted in the binary, this is about building relationships. It’s about being respectful and about listening and about helping fight when asked.

If I’m listening closely enough and understanding, what trans and nonbinary people I know are asking is pretty simple:

Call me by the names I prefer. Get to know me as the unique individual I am, not a label that describes just one part of me. Respect my privacy as you would for anyone else. Help keep me safe and support me in my fight for justice.

\* *Not their real names*

For a useful guide to terms, see GLAAD’s [Glossary of Terms: Transgender](#)