

Come as You Are
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading - from “Rethinking Non/Binary” by Eli Erlick

The truth of my gender wasn't always safe to reveal. Over time, that truth was changed through outward lies. In fourth grade, my teacher made us write a paragraph about ourselves in the third person to hang on our classroom wall. I wanted to refer to myself with “they” pronouns, but my teacher told me that it wasn't possible and grammatically incorrect. I had already figured out “he”—the pronoun assigned to me at birth— didn't fit me; but “she” didn't feel quite right either. I knew I didn't belong in either of those categories. “They” felt like a good place, separate from the cisgender men and women whom I couldn't relate to. However, when I attempted to write about myself using these pronouns, the other students forced me to “pick one” and concede that there were only two options. That day, my classmates harassed me into silence; the girls rolled their eyes at me and the boys kicked me in the groin to try to figure out my assigned sex. I was too scared to argue. Asserting a pronoun that wasn't assigned to me at birth angered the other children. They hadn't met anyone like me before. I was forced out of negating the male or female label, even if neither was correct. During this experience, I felt like my self-perception was somehow wrong or broken. As for the paragraph, I used my name instead of pronouns and refused to provide any information about myself. If one part of the statement wasn't truthful, none of it could be.

Sermon

“Come as You Are” is my sermon today – a continuation of our “Widening the Circle” theme from last week.

Rami Shapiro (in his book *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent*) writes: “If you listen to the great sages and mystics of the perennial wisdom... you will find a moral compass that always points toward justice and compassion.”

The compass? Rami Shapiro points out that maybe it's pretty simple: The Golden Rule. And as you know, there are variations in just about every tradition and culture around the world:

From the Christian Gospels: Do to others what you would have others do to you.

To Confucius: Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.

To Islam: No one of you is a believer until you desire for others that which you desire for yourself.

And so on.

As for that Muslim iteration? What *do* we most fundamentally desire for ourselves? How about: To be loved, to be respected, to be treated with kindness and understanding and compassion.

This would of course apply no matter what sort of person we are – what color our skin, what religion we follow, or... where we are on the spectrum of gender, my primary example this morning.

And this diversity of who we are as human beings means that the Golden Rule is a general admonition which must be made specific. We don't treat everyone the same, because everyone is different and everyone's needs are different. So the call of the Golden Rule is to treat everyone not the same, but with the same respect, kindness, and compassion – and how that manifests will vary.

This sometimes – maybe often – requires that we learn something about another person.

There was a letter to “Ask Amy” in the Boston Globe earlier this week which began with this sentence:

My child came out to my husband and me as non-binary, using they/them pronouns and a new name.

The writer went on to say that she was struggling to change the way she addressed her child, wanting to get it right, but that her husband wasn't even trying and that he believes it shouldn't bother their child if he uses the pronouns and names they were born with.

The writer says she is confused, indeed even wondering whether she should leave her husband because though, in her words, he isn't rejecting their child, “it's just not really acceptance.”

Amy's response was beautiful. Among other things, she wrote:

When someone says, “This is who I am. This is my name. This is my identity...” and another person responds: “No it isn't...” that's basically the definition of “rejection.”

Amy continued:

...accepting someone's right to define their own personhood and identity is what it means to love someone.

Well, this pretty much says it all doesn't it – says a lot anyway.

Now, in her response Amy also acknowledged that particularly for those of us who have been around for several decades and more, it is an adjustment to learn to use personal pronouns differently; so we will make mistakes. But if at the heart of our efforts to get it right is compassion, kindness, respect and love, then we keep at it.

I know it is taking me time, for example, to learn to sometimes use “they” as singular. But I'm working on it! Because deeper, far deeper, than grammar is the moral compass of the Golden Rule.

Anyway, it is worth noting that grammar and the English language (like any language) is always changing. A column in the New York Times this week – by a linguistics professor at Columbia, John McWhorter – made this very point. The word “you,” for example, as you probably know, was not always used as both plural and singular. And sometimes it still creates confusion when we have to differentiate between you, an individual, and you all, a group of folks. But we figure it out!

As we will learn to do with “they, them, theirs.”

Now, I don’t have to tell you that in our nation and in the world today we are facing enormous challenges: COVID and the climate crisis perhaps topping the list, but both of these woven with the poisonous threads of racism and economic inequality and much else – here in our nation and among the nations of the world.

So my heart breaks, as I expect yours does, when I see immigrants from Haiti brutally treated at the southern border and deported to their home country beset by violence and recovering from earthquakes.

My heart breaks for the women and girls denied their rights under the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

My heart breaks for women denied access to the health care of abortion in our own country.

My heart breaks observing the petty politics in congress as they continue to fail to adequately address the climate crisis, voting rights, police reform, infrastructure, and much else.

Plenty to break the heart.

So why spend time today talking about pronouns and the spectrum of gender identity?

First, for the sake of all those, each person precious – whether in our congregation, in our families, or wherever – who have too often *not* been accepted for who they are, who have not been supported in asserting their own gender identity, who have not felt that they can “come as you are”.

And next because every time we learn to become more understanding and compassionate to one person or one group of people... we are growing in understanding and compassion; and we are learning not just to mouth the words of the Golden Rule, but to live it a little better, to live this moral compass that can lead us closer to the true north of the beloved community of Dr. King, to less rancor and more respect, to less polarization and more peace, perhaps then better able to address all those other challenges

“Come as you are.”

Note that sometimes we don’t even let ourselves be who we are, instead feeling we have to conform to some social norm that doesn’t fit who we are! As well as, as we’ve been saying, sometimes failing to welcome others for who they are.

As many of you no doubt remember, we worked as a congregation a quarter century ago to learn to be a “Welcoming Congregation” to what then we described as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Many congregational conversations and presentations. And we all learned, we all grew as individuals and as a congregation. We are the better for it! Much better. So, for

example, when the struggle for equal marriage rights came along a few years later, we were ready and we, together, fully engaged with others to get laws and perceptions changed.

We had grown. And it was good.

Now (as always) the journey continues... of course....

As for me on this particular journey? I am a cisgender male – I identify with the gender of the sex I was assigned at birth; and I am heterosexual. Does it harm me in any way that other people are transgender or nonbinary or gay or lesbian or whatever, whoever they are? Of course not. In fact, aren't our lives richer for any sort of healthy diversity, including diversity on the spectrum of gender?

As I've said, I am going to make mistakes in how I talk about all this. I'll miss-state someone's pronouns. But then I'll apologize and try again. We are, after all, every last one of us, on a learning curve as human beings – about lots of things.

As we seek to get ever closer to the promised land, the beloved community: which is one in which everyone, each and all, can come as they are, be who they are even when who they are is considered by some or used to be thought of as outside of society's so-called norms, arbitrary and too often hurtful, oppressive norms.

And really, how boring are some of those norms! How boring a world of only white, cisgender, straight men and women.

Anyway, we are called far more deeply than by culturally stereotyped norms. We are called by the moral compass of the Golden Rule, called by our Unitarian Universalist "Principles" affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each person along with the quest for justice for all, called by our inward sense of the divinity or preciousness of each human being, called to the depth of acceptance that is love.

In this spirit is a poem a colleague shared with a group of us this week: "In the Evening We Shall Be Examined on Love" by Thomas Centolella. You can look it up, but here are a few of the closing lines – with which I'll close this morning:

...in the evening...
we shall be examined on love like students
who don't even recall signing up for the course
and now must take their orals, forced to speak for once
from the heart and not off the top of their heads.
And when the evening is over and it's late,
the student body asleep, even the great teachers
retired for the night, we shall stay up
and run back over the questions, each in our own way:
what's true, what's false, what unknown quantity
will balance the equation, what it would mean years from now
to look back and know
we did not fail.

So may it be.