

*Sermon given at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Upper Valley
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***Trans People
and the
Cornerstones
of
Unitarian Universalism***

by Grace Alden

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Good morning. A few months ago, I was approached by a UU minister. He was helping out a congregation which is searching for a new minister. They had done some groundwork and found that the congregation struggled with two possibilities: calling a trans minister, and calling a disabled minister. He invited me to preach.

A sermon very much like this one was the result. I mentioned its existence to Patience, who kindly invited me to bring it home to my own congregation.

Like most people, I am many things. I am a mother. I am a wife. I am a daughter. I am a hiker and camper. I am a writer. I practice Aikido. I built my family's straw bale house. For the last ten years, I have been a licensed massage therapist. For over twenty-one years, I was a police officer, an employment which I regarded as a calling. During my career as a police officer, I worked as a field training officer, a patrol supervisor, a firearms instructor, a defensive tactics instructor, a crash reconstructionist, and an operator on my department's tactical team.

I am 46 years old.

I am a cancer survivor.

I am a woman.

The fact that I am a woman is something which I have had to assert and defend in the face of determined opposition, because I'm also transsexual.

And when people learn that I am transsexual, quite often that knowledge

completely overshadows everything else I have just mentioned about myself.

When I was invited to preach, I asked that minister for guidance. He suggested that I start with the 7 UU Principles and, and I quote, “try to link your remarks in some way to what they imply.”

And I thought, “What a wonderful exercise! We could see which UU Principles apply!” Like most UUs, I have reviewed the 7 Principles and allowed as how I think they make some good points, but I had never cornered them and demanded that they account for themselves to me specifically as a trans woman. So I ran over them in my mind and did a little reading. And I’ll be darned if I didn’t discover that *all seven* were directly relevant to my life experience, not just as a police officer, or a mother, or a builder, or a scholar, but as a trans woman.

So I dug deeper, to see what I might learn.

The First Principle is, of course, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Its applicability seemed obvious. It was so obvious that I almost cheated myself. But I remembered something another trans woman said, I came back to it.

little light is a trans woman of color who lives in the Pacific Northwest. In 2009, she wrote

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I let the world tell me lies. I let myself believe that I was so bad and wrong and

monstrous that I deserved what I got, that I even let someone rape me just because I was so desperately craving to be touched at all, because even abuse was more closeness than I felt I deserved. I let myself absorb the idea that I was completely delusional, and that all my knowledge about myself was false twitchings of a sick mind, because the alternative to that painful lie, the lie that I was a monster living in a fantasy world who was inherently freakish and unlovable? The alternative was worse. The alternative was that I *didn't* deserve it, I *wasn't* disgusting and unworthy of love, that I was a child put in an abusive situation and forced to stay there for no good reason. I wasn't strong enough to let that be true, as a child. I wasn't strong enough to let that be true as a teenager who couldn't sleep, who worked out on a punching bag every day after school until her hands bled, who spent every day thinking of newer, cleaner exits from living. I wasn't strong enough to let that be true as a college student who was fetishized and mocked and treated as a contaminated, essentially pornographic animate sex toy unworthy of any kind of closeness that didn't have the tinge of "dirty" and "perverted" seeping into it, who couldn't hug people or say "I love you" without fear that it would be considered creepy.

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It seems to me that the First Principle is more than how we treat each other. It can also be discovered in how we treat ourselves. The First Principle applies even when you're sitting alone in a room. In order to learn to be comfortable in myself, my second step was to learn, to know, that I had inherent worth and dignity, and that I would *still* have inherent worth even if I admitted to myself that I was a trans woman, and that it was possible to be a trans woman with dignity.

When I transitioned from presenting socially as a man to presenting socially as myself, I had been a police officer for 18 years. Another trans officer gave me a piece of advice for my first day on the job as myself: “Walk into the room like you own it.” And I did. And she was right. I walked into that room with dignity and purpose, and it carried the day, and many other days.

But not all of the days. Some of my coworkers could not, in the end, get past their belief that biology was destiny. They did not act against me to my face, but they did not support me, and they let me know in many small ways that I was merely tolerated.

Colleen Fay said, “When you put on a dress, wear makeup, put on earrings, and go out and ask the world to accept you as a woman, you are greeted 50 times a day with a slap in the face. How much does this half gallon of milk cost? It's \$3.99--and a slap in the face. How much is the subway fare? It's \$1.75--and a slap in the face.”

For the last three years of my career, I went to work at my department not as the person I had tried so hard to be, but as myself. And the price of going to work was, every day, slaps in the face. Almost none of those were from members of the public. The slaps came from a small subset of my fellow officers, the same people I was supposed to rely upon someday if I had to fight for my life, or yours. The cumulative impacts wore on me, no matter how I tried to roll with them. When they started to wear on my ability to perform my duties, I realized that it was becoming possible for me to hate a calling which I had loved, and a department I

had been loyal to for over twenty years. Rather than go any further down *that* path, I retired.

It only took a few people. I wish that their simplistic understanding of biology had been sufficient. But it wasn't. Neither was mine, at first, and unless you are an evolutionary biologist, probably neither is yours.

Trans people are routinely understood to be aberrations, even by people who love us. It is very common to ask, "What *causes* transsexuality?"

Biologist Julia Serano wrote

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As a scientist, I can understand why people might feel that "what causes transsexuality?" is a compelling question. But as a trans person I find that such questions invariably reduce me to an object of inquiry and curiosity. In other words, questions of etiology marginalize me.

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Serano also wrote

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Once I accepted my own transsexuality, then it became obvious to me that the

question "Why do transsexuals exist?" is not a matter of pure curiosity, but rather an act of non-acceptance, as it invariably occurs in the absence of asking the reciprocal question: "Why do cissexuals exist?" The ... search to uncover the cause of transsexuality is designed to keep transsexual gender identities in a perpetually questionable state, thereby ensuring that cissexual gender identities continue to be unquestionable.

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She's right. But it doesn't matter in the public square. Trans people are rare, and so we must be explained. People want to know: *What went wrong?*

Our Seventh Principle is "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

One of the foundation stones of resilience in a living system is diversity. Species evolve by varying the pattern and seeing what works. Without mutation, without shuffling the genetic deck in various ways, species cannot adapt, and the next large stressor is the end of the species.

Averaged over many events, this mutation and selection drives a population with mathematical precision. Evolutionary biologist Joan Roughgarden lays it out in her book, *Evolution's Rainbow*. She writes,

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Any genetic trait is an investment that may pay a dividend in offspring at some time and place. But at any particular time and place, a gene can be down on its luck. Only an inherited trait deleterious under *all* conditions can be considered a genetic defect. Furthermore, a trait that is deleterious under all conditions is necessarily rare. ... Genetic defects are automatically weeded out over time by natural selection. The only way defects resurface is by mutation... the degree of rarity for a genetic defect is set by a balance between two rates: the rate of formation by mutation and the rate of elimination by natural selection. This level of rarity is called a mutation-selection equilibrium... If a trait is lethal, [if the reduction in fitness is 100%,] then it occurs only as often as the mutation rate, which is one in a million... If the reduction in fitness is only 5 percent, the trait occurs at a frequency of 1 in 50,000... Even if a trait isn't particularly harmful, and a 5 percent loss of fitness wouldn't be all that easy to detect, this degree of disadvantage, if sustained through all generations everywhere, would eventually lead to the trait becoming as rare as 1 in 50,000.

Meanwhile, relatively common traits, say those in the 1 in 10 to 1 in 1,000 range, can only be consistent with a tiny and undetectable loss of fitness. ... The phrase "common genetic disease" is a contradiction in terms.

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If I may summarize Roughgarden in lay terms, if it's common, and it's genetic, it can't be wrong.

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How is this relevant to trans people? That depends upon how common we are. The latest survey data, from the Williams Institute, tells us that there are about 700,000 trans people in the United States. That's a greater number of human beings than live in the State of Vermont. There are plenty of good reasons for trans people not to identify ourselves to surveyors, so that number is low. But if it were exactly right, it would mean that one in every 400 Americans is trans. Other recent data, taken by more anonymous methods, tend to come in higher, around 1 in 200. For school kids, the numbers are higher. Around 1 in 100 to 1 in 50.

(Why are the numbers so much higher for school children? Two main reasons, I think: they haven't learned yet how to hide, and they're still alive.)

According to the US Religious Landscape Survey released by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, about 1 in 330 of the US population is Unitarian Universalist. That's about 680,000 people. So trans people are about as common as Unitarian Universalists.

The population of Grafton County, NH, is about 90,000. So there are roughly 250 to 500 trans people in Grafton County, or enough to put together 3 to 6 congregations as big as this one.

So trans people are somewhere around 1:400 to 1:200. For comparison, the prevalence of women under 5 feet tall is about 1:20. Redheads are about 1:50 or 1:100. Redheads with blue eyes come in at about 1:500. Redheaded women under 5 feet tall: about 1:1300.

Trans people are more common than redheads with blue eyes. Let me see a show of hands. How many people in this room know a redhead with blue eyes?

Redheads with blue eyes aren't something gone wrong. Neither are trans people. Redheads with blue eyes are just another variation of human being. So are trans people. We are not broken. We are not aberrant. We are too common for that. We are just another way to be human.

How is it that we are so common, and yet, seem so rare? Well, our society pathologizes us, vilifies us, demonizes us, withholds medical care, and permits discrimination in employment and housing. So we do what anyone learns to do in a war zone: we keep our heads down and try not to present a target. Those of us who survive learn to get by. We pretend to be the gender we were assigned at birth. We learn to pass as something we are not.

It doesn't exactly create an environment which is conducive to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Which brings us to the Fourth Principle.

I was born in 1969, and I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, but I'm pretty sure that I was away at college at Dartmouth before I heard the adjective "transsexual". We've heard a lot about tolerance in the last ten or twenty years, but when I was growing up, my society didn't even tolerate people like me. People were careful not to expose their children to the *idea* of people like me. They feared that exposure to the *idea* of people like me would be corrupting. The children might turn out to be trans.

I turned out to be trans anyway. It's not something you learn; it's just how the dice come up. What you learn is how to treat trans people.

As a child, it would have been better for me to know that I wasn't a freak. It would have been better for me to have a vocabulary to talk about people like me. When I was trying to figure out what I was, my society gave me no path to understanding. I was outside of definitions and categories.

In many early historic legal systems, among the harshest punishments was to declare someone an outlaw. This was not a label or an epithet — it was a legal status. Out... law. An outlaw was outside of legal protections. You could kill or persecute an outlaw, and there would be no legal sanction. In early Germanic law, there was no death penalty. But there was outlawing.

When I was growing up, our society taught me that people like me were outside of the definition of "acceptable". We were cultural outlaws. And we knew it. Act outside the role of your assigned gender as a schoolchild and the censure is swift and certain. In grade school I got called "faggot", and "homo" a lot.

Notice that my tormentors didn't have the words for what I was, either. They just had to get by with the vocabulary they had. They thought they were looking at a gentle, introverted boy, and so they knew they must be looking at a faggot. And I was gay, in fact, since I was a girl attracted to girls. But they didn't know that. They just knew that I wasn't a boy like them. They were clear that I didn't belong, and they made sure that I got clear on it. Until I learned how to perform, how to be

a convincing counterfeit boy, so that when I transitioned from grade school where I grew up to high school far away, I was able to present myself more effectively in a male role, and the teasing mostly stopped.

There were many steps on my search for meaning, but the first step was the biggest: finding and learning the words which enabled me to think it. To conceive it. To speak it.

Nowadays things are much better. We have the Internet. There are good role models out there, and information. You have to filter a lot of misinformation and poison, but the signal-to-noise ratio gets better every day. The Internet has been a terrific boon to trans people. And now we have made great strides, in our society, to the point that we are often tolerated.

It's better than being an outlaw, that's for sure. If you're starting from "outlaw," then "tolerated" is something to aspire to. If being an outlaw is like wading neck-deep in sewage, then being tolerated is like wading knee-deep. It may be better, but don't stop there.

Brynn Tannehill is a former Naval helicopter pilot and trans woman. Here's how she describes working in a tolerant environment:

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A tolerant... workplace, means walking on eggshells ... and being surrounded by people who keep conversations and relationships strictly professional. No one has

a mean word to say, but then again, no one has a word to say. . . . You eat alone, and no one bothers you while you do. If you don't do work-related social functions, no one calls you on it, because both sides know that you're not comfortable there, nor are the people entirely comfortable with you being there. Discretely ignoring your lack of presence effectively sidesteps the real issues. What you do at work, those eight hours a day, may be valuable. It may be needed. But that isn't sufficient to make you want it. You may be legally protected... that still isn't enough. . . .In the absence of community and acceptance, you are a ghost. People can be tolerant to the point of not saying anything, if their lives depend on it, but that doesn't mean . . . they want you to be a part of their lives. . . .You are alien. You are other. People don't smile... and you say nothing to them in turn, because you realize that their day is all the more pleasant, if not confronted with your existence. Mere tolerance [has] no past, and no future, an existence out-of-phase with its reality. . . .this tolerant existence precludes the opportunities to build fully-realized relationships. There is no starting point to discover commonalities, to build, to connect, or to love, or to be loved, to be needed, and wanted, and have the full range of the human experience available to you. The difference between tolerance and acceptance is our spiritual survival.

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Tannehill's description sounds very familiar to me. I've been there. I once tried to explain to one of my coworkers how abandoned I felt, how effectively it isolated me when I was excluded by fellow officers who justified it with the phrase, "*I'm just not comfortable.*" He interrupted me, misunderstanding what I had not finished saying, to say that he did not think that in a tactical situation any of my

fellow officers would abandon me. I was still fighting to stay in police work, at that point, and I felt that I needed him as an ally, so stopped talking. I didn't have the footing to say: "I've been taking hits for the last year and a half, and I haven't seen you stepping up. You wouldn't abandon me? You already have."

And it's not just a workplace phenomenon. Trans people who are tolerated in church will leave that church, or will hide that they are trans. At a job, you may stay for the pay, or the benefits, or because no one else will hire a visibly trans person. But in a church, people who don't feel welcome don't have to stick around.

As I expressed it once, to all of you,

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All of us are, individually, gardens. All of us have been planted with apples, and pears, and guavas, and running vines of beans, and oaks, and mosses, and dandelions, and roses, and nettles, and brambles, and poison ivy, and deadly nightshade. How we work on ourselves determines what stays and what goes. That work involves sweating, and breathing, and tugging, and chopping, and hauling, and sun, and wind, and rain, and scratches, and itches, and sunburn, and aloe vera, and antihistamines and antivenins.

There is a vine which is common to all of us. It has deep roots, and it spreads by seeds and runners, and it likes to pretend to be other plants which are necessary and good. It's even critically important itself, in a narrow set of circumstances, but

it does like to overgrow other things we're hoping to harvest.

Its name is Fear.

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Our society taught us, you and me, to fear trans people. We were taught to fear the *implications* of trans people. Our society planted these fears deep and thoroughly, so that its roots are entwined with many of our assumptions and beliefs. It takes hard work to root it out. Conscious, purposeful work. I had to do it within myself, to come to a place where, when I was alone in a room, I was not in the room with someone disgusting. I know how difficult this work is. But I could only work on myself. It's not given to me to work on what's in other people, even though what's in other people certainly affects me. You have to do that work yourselves, or continue to be an active part of a society which has trained you to be reflexively toxic toward trans people. That's your choice.

People in our society are currently debating bathroom and locker room use. And when I transitioned at work, I used to reach out to fearful people, to try to humanize trans people with my own face, a face they knew. I wanted to be conciliatory and helpful. Surviving trans people, the ones who have not been beaten to death or pushed into suicide, are in some ways like adult children of alcoholics. We have learned how to appease, accommodate, get by, and isolate ourselves socially to limit further trauma. I did not ask the question, "When you express your fear of sharing a bathroom with a trans person, what are you saying about *ME?*" But I was certainly well aware of the implications of their actions,

that trans people were so to be feared, as a class of people, that it was reasonable to bar the door to me, a sworn colleague of two decades of unblemished service, who had a reputation in my agency for being, and I'm quoting another officer, "More ethical than smart." It took me a long time to understand that it was precisely because of who I was that the door be barred to me, personally; because once someone conceded that I was no danger to them in a locker room, they would then have to concede that, in fact, that might be true of a lot of trans people. And then those disgusting trans people would get into the bathroom. But if you could justify keeping *me* out, you could justify keeping every last one of us out.

I have largely abandoned my helpful, conciliatory stance. The evidence is clear: trans people are not assaulting cis people in bathrooms. It's been reported about five times in the right-wing media, and each time the incident was found to be fabricated. It's a thing which does not happen. On the other hand, the evidence is also abundantly clear that trans people have been assaulted in bathrooms many times, and threatened in bathrooms many times. We are a bit under one percent of the population, and yet, all the assaults are running one way.

Most men don't want me in their bathroom, and I don't want to be there. Many women don't want me in their bathroom. That leaves me with a choice between holding it for twelve hours a day, trying to go in the bushes somewhere, or soiling myself and going about my business, which might include riding public transit next to you.

In the environmental movement, we all had to learn that there is no "away". When we throw something "away", it actually goes somewhere real, and imposes real

consequences there, which impose real consequences back on us.

Likewise, there is no getting “away” from trans people. You may have the luxury of not seeing us much, because we have been taught, viciously, how to hide. But we are all around you. You give birth to us, and we give birth to you. You absolutely will interact with trans people. You will express opinions around trans people, often without knowing it. There is no Other Place for us to go. This is an issue of public safety, public cleanliness, and human dignity. There is no room in it for unexamined fears.

So now I’m asking the question: Why is this my problem? Why am I being asked to suffer, in order to accommodate the unexamined fears of cisgender people? I didn’t create this situation. I don’t control it. I didn’t ask to be trans. I used to experience shame that I was trans, but I don’t anymore, because I dug into that poison oak, rooted it out, and planted healthy things where the fear and loathing used to grow. It took a lot of work, but it was in *my* head, and so even though *I* didn’t put it in there, *I* had to root it out. The grief I get about being trans no longer comes from within. It comes from without, from other people who want me to carry their load, their load of fear.

I refuse to carry that load anymore. I kept my spirit alive through over twenty years of police work. In the end, a small number of my fellow officers refused to carry their own fear. That struck inside my heart and I could not discover a way to not care about it. So I faced an ugly choice between throwing myself clear, or letting it kill me. I should not have had to make that choice, and the better members of my community should not have had to trade a proven and experienced

officer to enable other officers to be free from examining and resolving their fears. Brynn Tannehill is right. The difference between tolerance and acceptance is our spiritual survival.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of our own Unitarian feminists, said, “The moment we begin to fear the opinions of others and hesitate to tell the truth that is in us, and from motives of policy are silent when we should speak, the divine floods of light and life no longer flow into our souls.”

This is the truth I refuse to remain silent about: This fear is inside you. I’m sorry that it is. But you have no right to demand that other people carry it for you. I had to make an ugly choice. So do you. This is the ugly choice which has been put before you: Demand that others carry your load so that you don’t have to face it, or root it out.

Until people do this, more thoroughly than they want to, sometimes I choose not to be around people, because they say the damndest things to me, without even understanding what they’ve said.

I carried this exercise through all Seven Principles. There was only one Principle where I didn’t immediately see a relevance to trans people. The Fifth: “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

Democracy is a fine thing, but what on earth does democracy have to do with trans people? We are a tiny minority, and a democratic majority can tyrannize us at will.

That was my first thought. Then I did some reading and got schooled by Rev. Parisa Parsa, who wrote,

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In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience — a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of Theodore Parker, ‘Democracy means not “I am as good as you are,” but “You are as good as I am.”’ My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others.

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Well, you *are* as good as I am. And I’m here to tell you that I’m a trans woman and I am, in fact, as good as you are. And so are the racial minorities, and the cisgender women, and the effeminate men, and the gay people. They’re as good as you are, and you’re as good as they are, and as good as I am.

And here we discover the First Principle again. I had to understand that there was nothing to fear in what I am, that what I am is as good as anyone else. I had to embody it before I could be comfortable in myself.

A congregation has to embody it before a trans person can be comfortable in the congregation. A community has to embody it before a trans person can be

comfortable in the community.

Thorough understanding of anything requires hard work, questions and discussion and thought. We're in luck! We're going to have a discussion forum in the round, right there, at 11:45.

Thank you for taking the time and spending the effort to digest what I have set before you today. Each of us is a garden. May we all be successful in planting what is good and rooting out what isn't... and discerning the difference.