

***Trans Youth:
Ignorance,
Bullying
and
Homelessness***

by Grace Alden

©2015

All rights reserved with this one exception: Permission granted to Unitarian Universalists to copy and distribute it, as long as they do not modify it and charge no money for it.

Welcome (board member) and Announcements

Chalice Lighting by Sparrow

Grace sings: *To Keep You Warm*, by Joe Crookston:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I11YA4KweJA>

Time for all ages: Collection of Donations for the Haven (Song: *This Little Light of Mine*)

Joys and Concerns

Grace leads congregation in song: *Spirit of Life*, in English and Spanish

—

[Make sure very young people went with Miss Sheena.]

I would do anything to keep you warm. It's a cozy sentiment. It's how I feel about my children. It's probably how you feel about your children.

We keep them warm, and we are willing to break ourselves to do it. We give them a home, and we do what we have to do. All parents do that, right?

No. Not all parents do.

Bullying is a hot national conversation, right now. Recently commentator and activist Dan Savage attended the White House summit on bullying. He later remarked that he couldn't help but notice that there was a lot of talk about parenting, and supporting and enabling parents to help their kids. But when it comes to the bullying of LGBT children, it's often actually the parents who are the problem. Of the general population, around 3-10% is LGBT, depending on the methodology of the survey. Call it 7%. But of this country's homeless youth, 40% are LGBT. Forty percent.

Homelessness is awful. Remember, I'm not talking about homeless families, such as the ones this congregation helps to support at The Haven. I'm not talking about an urban version of the Swiss Family Robinson. I'm talking about children trying to survive all by themselves. It is dirty. It is dangerous. Hunger. Malnutrition. Drugs. Communicable diseases. Assault. Rape. Kidnapping.

Grace sings: *By Now*, by Richard Shindell:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VsyO2w1Pn8>

Hunger, malnutrition, drugs, communicable diseases, assault, rape, kidnapping. Children know all that. If they don't know it when they run away, they know it within a few days. They could go "home". Those who are counted in the statistics are the ones who haven't returned, even knowing what they now know, about homelessness.

Because they also know what they've left behind.

What happens in the "homes" of these children which makes homelessness a better alternative? Why is it apparently so much worse for LGBT children?

Joanne Keatley is a trans woman who transitioned fifty years ago. In a recent interview, she said the following:

"My family were very typical Latinos—my Mom by then was a single parent, and my brother was the oldest in the family. He had very clear notions of masculinity and femininity. I didn't fit those stereotypes and my family really struggled with it. To the point where there was lots of physical and emotional abuse about my not fitting into those patterns.

"I left home at 14. My brother had gone off to Vietnam, and my Mom and I lived in a two-story apartment.

"I came downstairs and was headed to the kitchen, and I saw this blur coming at me from the side—my mom was coming at me with a knife, and she was screaming that she would rather see me dead. It was horrific.

"There had been a lot of attempts at browbeating me, but this was—she really was coming at me with this weapon. We fought; I will always remember that, how I knocked the knife out of her hand, it flew across the kitchen, and we struggled. I left home that day, and ended up out on the streets of Los Angeles."

What happens in the "homes" of these children which makes homelessness a better alternative? That's what happens. Or something like it. You'll hear a lot of rage from many of these children. You'll see a lot of acting out. They may be difficult. That doesn't mean that they're not in a dangerous situation at "home". It doesn't mean they're making a wrong tactical choice when they leave home.

For the next few years after she ran away from her homicidal mother, Joanne Keatley did sex work to feed herself. She says,

“Really in the beginning it was exchanging my body for a place to stay and a place to sleep and eat. ... Of course there were lots of interactions with criminal justice. I would end up getting picked up by the police, getting sent to juvenile hall, they would call my mother who would refuse to come and get me out. Between 14-18, there were lots of times when I was apprehended and then my Mom would not come and get me for months, and then she would break down and get me, and I’d come home for a day or two and then leave. That’s what it was like for the first few years.”

She says,

“When I met my ex-husband, he saw in me something I hadn’t seen in myself: my intellect, and an appreciation for me as a human as opposed to a sexual object. The fact that he saw that in me allowed me to see it in myself, that changed my perspective on what I could do with my life. I really thought, prior to that, that I was doing all that I could do with my life, which was sell my body to survive. Being seen by someone else with a different lens allowed me to see it for myself.”

She describes the first time she earned money which didn’t come from a sex act:

“I remember going outside, leaving where I was and walking to the bus stop, and waiting out there in the frigid cold, and I couldn’t believe that I had a check in my pocket that I had earned that wasn’t related to sex work.”

What if you don’t want to do sex work? Well, you can seek shelter. But youth shelters are almost universally segregated by sex on the basis of genital conformation. So homeless trans youth face a choice: submit to being pervasively misgendered in exchange for food and shelter, or have their gender acknowledged in exchange for sexual assault and the possibility of food and shelter. Remember, these are children who left home rather than submit. They have no problem leaving a shelter.

There are shelters which serve the trans youth population directly, which understand their needs, which do not make food and shelter contingent upon the erasure and denial of their identity. In New York City, the shelter has 187 beds. In the entire country, there are about 800 such beds.

In this country, there are roughly 75,000 homeless trans youth.

Joanne Keatley left, and paid the price for *that*. Many children stay, and pay the price for *that*. Blogger and trans woman of color little light remembers her childhood this way:

“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 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.”

As Dan Savage points out,

“... a lot of LGBT kids, a lot of gay and bi boys, particularly gay boys who are effeminate, are targeted for abuse by predators who know that that kid's own sense of conflict and shame about their sexual orientation will make that kid less likely to go get help or report to an adult what happened to them, lest that kid draw attention to this thing that he's trying to hide from everybody else. So a lot of kids who are queer are targeted for abuse, are molested *because* they're queer; it doesn't *make* them queer.”

That's what our society does to its gender-variant children.

Blogger Harriet J is a straight woman who escaped an abusive situation in her teens. At some point during working on her own self, she met some sex workers, and she had to confront her own internalized opinions of people who perform sex acts in order to make a living. She did this by listening to sex workers and eventually realizing that they had agency, and initiative, and were capable of making rational decisions about their own welfare. And although she had not done

sex work herself, she recognized a lot of her own abusive history in the people she was listening to. She wrote,

“Sex work is not where abuse is created and born; it's where abuse goes to live. Always and forever, abuse will live with those society has decided are barely real, barely human, barely worthwhile, unworthy of defense and unworthy of the tools they need to defend themselves. If we want abuse to go away from those people, we make them more important, more human, more worthwhile, *less easy pickings*, and we can't do that while telling them what they may do with their bodies, what they may think with their minds, how they may live, what they may do with their time and abilities and desires. Real, autonomous, fully sentient beings do not need permission to live in their own bodies, and if we treat sex workers like they can't know what they need, can't judge it accurately, can't acquire it well, we will continue to label them as something less than inalienable, and abuse with always have a home with them.”

What Harriet J says applies exactly to gender-variant people. As long as people get a pass when they consider us subhuman, we will be where abuse goes to live. And that's true of all forms of abuse and discrimination. If you value me as a member of this community, and if you value the policework I have done for the last twenty-one years, consider that if I had been out as trans I never would have been hired. Almost certainly, I would not be hired *today*. They would not say why; they would simply write that other candidates did better or that I was not a good fit for the department. The fact that I have an education and marketable skills and a praiseworthy employment history all depends on the fact that I was able to pass as something I was not, for many years, until I couldn't do it anymore and transitioned.

There are plenty of trans people who cannot pass as cis, and they pay a price. Milton Diamond, professor of anatomy and reproductive biology, put it this way: “Nature loves variety. Society hates it.”

Society surely does.

And, when it's safer to pretend not to be LGBT, a lot of people will take the route of safety, and make sure that they have tonight's supper and tomorrow's supper before they stick their heads above the parapet.

But some people can't get down behind that parapet in the first place, and they become the trailblazers. We can celebrate the current strides forward when it comes to LGBT rights. We can celebrate *this congregation's ground-breaking work in that arena*. We can celebrate that being out and gay didn't end Michael Sam's pro football career, that he was still picked in the NFL

draft. We can celebrate the fact that the winner of the Eurovision song competition in 2014 was a drag queen, Conchita Wurst.

But the fact that Michael can be out and proud was bought with the blood and suffering of the people who couldn't conform. Dan Savage puts it this way:

“It is telling and revealing that it is the Conchita Wursts of the world -- the gender-non-conforming gay men, the fairies, the faggots, the swishes -- the guys who couldn't hide who've been out for decades, and it is the more masculine gay men who've only recently begun to come out en masse. They didn't have the option of waiting... until the environment was more generally accepting... And... The world got better because other people were out earlier, other people were out and fighting, and it was almost invariably the people who couldn't hide. It was the swishes, it was the Conchita Wursts, it was the drag queens, it was the bull dykes, it was the trans women. They were the fighters. They were the first to the ramps, because when you can't hide, you have to fight. And those folks... have created this world where it's now safe for Michael Sam to be out.”

It bears remembering that many of those fighters were children, child soldiers drafted by their society into fighting because they could not conceal that they were not “normal”. Larry King was 15 years old when his classmate shot him in the head, in California, in 2008, for the crime of acting in an effeminate manner as he tried to figure his teen self out. In 2014, in Portland, OR, a child was four years old when he was beaten to death by his mother because she thought that he walked and talked in a gay way. In 2010, police on Long Island arrested a man who beat a 17-month-old child to death because he had been acting too feminine.

In New York, the average age that gay and lesbian youth become homeless is age 14.4. The average age that trans youth become homeless is age 13.5.

That's a difference of 46 weeks. Forty-six weeks of exposure to the merciless market forces which make sex work a rational survival strategy, because the only asset a trans child has is their body, and it turns out that if you're pretty, or just young, you can get money for food and medical care by renting your body out by the minute. Forty-six weeks during a stage of development when there is rapid neurological growth and spiritual development. How you define God has a lot to do with your relationship with the most influential adults in your life at that age. If that's your pimp, or the cop who keeps arresting you, then in order to grow, later, you may find it necessary to reject God.

That difference is part of the reason that 1-in-6 trans women have seen the inside of a jail. It's part of the reason that 1-in-2 trans women of color have seen the inside of a jail. It's part of the reason that so many trans women have worked in survival sex work.

Last year, the Williams Institute released "Injustice at Every Turn", the first comprehensive attempt to statistically document the lives and situations of the American population of trans people. One of their most shocking findings was that 41% of trans people reported attempted suicide. That's about twice the rate of *PTSD* in American *combat* veterans (not suicide attempt; "just" *PTSD*). For the subset of trans people under 26, the percentage who report attempted suicide is 48%. Why do you suppose it's higher for younger trans people? Because at that rate, by the time we're older, some of us aren't around anymore to answer surveys. It's not that 41% of trans people have attempted suicide; it's that 41% have attempted it and survived.

How is it that we don't know these things? How is it that they have escaped our attention?

It's privilege. It's the privilege of displacement. If we don't like prostitution — and there are many good reasons not to like prostitution as it exists in our society — we have to choose between two things. On the one hand, we can systematically root out and address the inequities in our society which lead to sex work being the way it is, the devaluing of women, of women's labor, of femininity, of feminine people. We can set a higher standard for acceptable parenting, and take children out of abusive situations faster than we do. We can acknowledge that this will lead, *has, in fact, already led*, to systematic abuses of minorities, and the coerced sterilization of black people and other minorities. So we'll have to tackle that, too. It's a very hard road.

Or we can blame the whores, and arrest them, make sure that they have criminal records, make sure that they know their place, make sure that their shame keeps them silent, so that we don't have to hear it, so that we can dismiss whatever they say about themselves.

On the one hand, we can systematically root out and address our society's issues with femininity, with gender variance, with our standards of normality, which will require a lot of hard work, and a lot of collateral hard work.

Or we can blame the fags and the trannies and abuse them, make sure that they have criminal records and scars and ongoing untreated medical problems, make sure that they know their place, make sure that their shame keeps them silent, so that we don't have to hear it, so that we can dismiss whatever they say about themselves.

Feminist and blogger Jennifer Kessler put it this way:

"Those of us who've experienced abuse, rape and other violations don't keep it quiet because we're ashamed. Or because it's intensely personal.

The main reason we keep it quiet is because we know how you'll treat us if we tell you. We know you have a culturally-granted privilege to remain ignorant. To not know, and therefore not to be responsible. ... And certainly not to do anything that might help stop or at least curtail it somewhat in the future."

It's well-known that John Steinbeck reported on the conditions in the migrant labor camps during the Great Depression. In a letter to his editor, he once wrote,

"I break myself every time I go out because the argument that one person's effort can't really do anything doesn't seem to apply when you come on a bunch of starving children and you have a little money."

Confronted with the stark reality of starving children, Steinbeck could not remain ignorant of their suffering. And then he had to act, or his conscience would give him no peace.

That fact, that people of good conscience are driven to act once they know, is what makes ignorance such a powerful tool, and what prompted Jennifer Kessler to write,

"Ignorance is not 'nice.' It's not 'good people.' It's not 'I was just trying to have a nice dinner party, why'd she go and bring up a thing like that when all we were doing was saying how gosh awful wonderful the person who abused her is and how much we'd all like to see him elected God.'
Ignorance is the hammer in the hand of oppression."

This is not news. But it seems that we must learn it constantly.

In 1963, James Baldwin wrote, in *The Fire Next Time*,

"I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: *most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind.) **But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.**"

Recently I had the privilege of answering questions posed by a high school senior from my alma mater who decided to make understanding trans people her senior project. At the end, she asked me, "If you could let people know three things, what would they be?" She granted me the respect of designating, myself, what was important to me, and listening to it. And suddenly the answer crystallized within me, with a new certainty. I told her, "That trans people are what we say we are." Just that. Not three things. One thing. Everything flows from that.

Here is a correct frame to understand trans girls: we are girls with an endocrine problem. This is a correct frame to understand trans boys: they are boys with an endocrine problem. These frames are not perfect, but they're pretty good. They'll get you 98% of the way, with most trans people.

This framing requires you to accept that a boy can have a vagina. And there are no two ways about it; he can. And a girl can have a penis. If we learn anything at all from feminism, it is that in a just society, biology is not destiny. As biologist and trans woman Julia Serano put it,

"...we have a word to describe the act of reducing a woman to her body parts, to her genitals: it is called objectification."

"What's between my legs is not a phallic symbol, nor a tool of rape and oppression, it is merely my genitals."

"No qualifications should be placed on the term 'trans woman' based on a person's ability to 'pass' as female, her hormone levels, or the state of her genitals -- after all, it is downright sexist to reduce any woman (trans or otherwise) down to her mere body parts or to require her to live up to certain societally dictated ideals regarding appearance."

Or, put another way and with thanks to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: I have a dream that my two little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the appearance of their bodies but by the content of their character.

This re-framing takes work. We have to practice how to love and appreciate, in spite of the fear we have been taught. But as human beings, we are uniquely suited to this. Professor of Behavioral Science Nicholas Epley says, "Your brain's greatest skill is its ability to think about the minds of others in order to understand them better." That's our greatest ability. We have to use it.

Harriet J. granted sex workers the respect necessary to listen to them. If we want to curb this abuse, in our society, we have no choice but to treat gender variant people with respect. We must

listen to them. We must do other things, too, but we get to those via respect. There is no other path.

That's difficult, because it requires change in ourselves, change in how we look at the world, and at ourselves. It requires re-framing. One of my favorite authors, Neil Gaiman, had this to say about treating people with respect:

“I was reading a book ... which included the phrase ‘In these days of political correctness...’ talking about no longer making jokes that denigrated people for their culture or for the colour of their skin. And I thought, ‘That’s not actually anything to do with “political correctness”. That’s just treating other people with respect.’

“Which made me oddly happy. I started imagining a world in which we replaced the phrase ‘politically correct’ whenever we could with ‘treating other people with respect’, and it made me smile.

“You should try it. It’s peculiarly enlightening.

“I know what you’re thinking now. You’re thinking ‘Oh my god, that’s treating other people with respect *gone mad!*’”

We’ve made a huge step, as a society, by enabling any two consenting adults to form a family unit. Precisely because the population of LGBT people has been so often rejected and abused by our families of origin, we have learned to value families of choice, families of association, families of earned loyalty. Our society has always had these families of loyalty, of earned obligation. We call them marriages and adoptions. It’s just that we tried to bar the door to LGBT people.

This congregation is a Welcoming Congregation. Our children’s RE actively includes diverse family types. We had our discussion class around the required topics. We had the requisite sermons, and we had our worship materials vetted. We aren’t perfect, but we have worked toward this.

As a result, in this congregation’s extended community of about 800 people, we have a number of trans people about about 4 times the rate of trans people in the American population. This doesn’t mean we’re awesome on some impartial scale. It just means that we’re better than the average. Better than average can still leave a lot to be desired.

On marriage equality, our congregation was on the tip of the legal spear. I would not have joined a congregation which wasn’t. I would rather have been spiritually homeless. I would rather

have carried what I could and wandered, looking for a better class of people, than tried to pretzel myself up to be in fellowship with people who thought LGBT people are lesser, not deserving of the same basic rights as anyone else.

We already have adult OWL. We already have trans content in our OWL classes. We already teach people how to understand trans people.

These things are necessary, but everyone should be doing these things. They don't earn us a cookie. They're just the right thing to do. As Robert Heinlein put it,

“A man pays his bills, keeps himself clean, respects other people, and keeps his word. He gets no credit for this; he has to do this much just to stay even with himself. A ticket to heaven comes higher.”

It's worth asking what buys a ticket to heaven. For trans youth, what would bring heaven home?

Grace sings: *This is Home*, by Lucy Kaplansky:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFcdOpWVbXM>

Collection of Offering for Church Operations [Grace noodles about on the guitar]

Closing:

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of love, or the fire of commitment. These, we carry in our hearts until we meet again