

Being Better Allies

Note: This homily followed a reflection by a church member about their experience as a trans nonbinary person.

Reading *But Not the Hippopotamus* by Sandra Boynton

The challenge of living into our commitment to be a beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world is that our embrace always needs to be wider. We can't rest on our accomplishments once the metaphorical hippopotamus has come joined the lot of us. We need to keep reaching out, keep learning, keep welcoming, keep examining ourselves and noticing those places where our behavior doesn't align with our values –and then work to be in alignment. We need to notice the left-out armadillo and invite them along too.

Not to belabor the metaphor, but we have some work to do. The organization of transgender Unitarian Universalist religious professionals recently conducted a survey of trans Unitarian Universalists. 42% regularly experience trans-related marginalization in Unitarian Universalist spaces. Only 44% of trans people feel spiritually connected and nourished at their congregation. 72% do not feel that their congregation is fully inclusive of them. I want to say that we are the anomaly, that we don't follow those patterns, but I suspect that's just wishful thinking. So let's do this better. Let's bring ourselves into alignment with our values.

This service has been in the works for months – and grew out of conversations with many of you expressing some confusion and curiosity about transgender folks, a desire to be welcoming, a fear of doing things wrong and causing pain. I'm not standing here as an expert, many of you in this room know more than me. I am someone on my own journey about this, grateful to have teachers, including Cylise, who lovingly show me –and us – how to be a beloved community. Today, I offer all of us who hope to be better allies to our trans siblings, loved ones, and fellow congregants, three invitations. Reflect on your experiences of gender. Use your words well. Use your power well.

First reflect on your experience of gender. How did you come to know yourself as male, female, agender, nonbinary, or however you identify? How has your understanding of what it means to be a person of your gender changed throughout your life? How do society's expectations for your gender fit or not your experience? How have you managed those expectations, especially the ones you have internalized?

I've been spending time with these questions in recent weeks and thought of an old story about myself in a new way. It happened when I was three. My family went to a park. At that time, my hair was sparse and short. I was wearing my favorite red overalls. After an interaction with an adult who didn't know me, I went to my mother in tears, "mommy, why does that other mommy think I'm a boy?" After that, I started wearing dresses every day so no one would make that mistake again. I wore dresses for over two years straight to make sure everyone knew I was a girl.

Reflecting on that now, I have so much empathy for the little girl that I was, confused by others' assumptions about me and using the tools I had to make sure people could see me as I wanted to be seen. And that empathy expands to the transgender people in my life and in the world and the pain they experience when they are not seen for who they are.

What are your stories about your gender? About being seen for who you are or challenging expectations? How might they help you cultivate empathy for people with a different experience of gender? Another chance for reflection and learning is a class that I will be leading soon on 'transgender inclusion in congregations.' The class was created by a group of trans UU religious professionals. If you would like to participate, please let me know. Once we have our participants, we will select a time that works for us all.

Next, use your words well. There are so many subtle ways our words communicate who is welcome and who is unwelcome. "Men and women," "Sisters and brothers," "ladies and gentlemen." I know women, some of you in this room, who fought hard to have women included, who did the hard work of teaching that the words 'men' and 'mankind' are not gender neutral... and the work of inclusion in our language continues. Gender binary language leaves out people who are non-binary. I try to say things like "friends and neighbors," "siblings and cousins" or simply "everyone" instead. I'm sure I mess that up, but I'm working on it. I invite you to join me.

Pronouns are also an important part of using our words well. Our youth and young adults are leading us on this. They invite people to share pronouns as part of introductions and check-ins make using the right pronouns part of their covenants. I invite everyone to try this too – in meetings here, but also in other parts of your life. Ask people's names and the pronouns they use – and ask everyone not just the people who you suspect might be transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming. And when people tell you which pronouns they use, try your hardest to use them every time.

Which brings us to the use of they as a singular pronoun. There are a number of pronouns that nonbinary people use, but 'they,' 'them,' and 'theirs' is common. There is historical precedent for using they as a singular pronoun, but it can still sound strange to say, 'they' when talking about one person. I get that. As someone who crafts words professionally, who spends so much time with poetry or searching for just the right turn of phrase, I can sympathize with that. I complained about this once – and a person I respect responded in the loving, teaching way we hope someone responds when we're not in alignment with our values. "What are your highest values here?" She asked. After I tried to explain myself, she said. "I understand that you value using language in the way that feels proper to you, but is that more important than showing love and respect and care to someone else?" That clear framing stays with me. Love, respect, and care is more important to me than my own ideas about what words sound right together or the voice of Mr. McClement, my high school English teacher, that echoes in my head when I think about grammar and usage. I can tolerate that tiniest bit of discomfort for the sake of love, respect, and care. And, I've found, as I use they as a singular pronoun, it begins not to sound strange anymore. Let's use our words well.

Let's also use our power well. Each of us has power, whether that's authority in our workplaces or families, money, access to networks, or resources or so many other things. Because of the discrimination they face, trans people are poorer, and more likely to be homeless, unemployed, and struggle with mental health than the population as a whole.¹ While there are families in this congregation who are loving and supporting their transgender and gender nonconforming family members, that love and support is too uncommon. Those of us who want to be good allies, need to speak up. Let's interrupt people telling jokes about trans people. Let us use our power to change the signage to make single stall restrooms all gender restrooms. Let's reach out to the trans people in our lives and in this congregation to ask if there are ways that we can support them tangibly. Let's create norms in our communities that we ask people's pronouns and use them. We there is much work before us, but I hope that soon we will be fully live into the

¹ 'Transgender FAQ.' GLAAD. Retrieved from <https://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq>

commitment on the cover of your order of service, which is part of a statement issued by the Unitarian Universalist Association. 'We unapologetically reject any effort to erase transgender people. We affirm the inherent worth, dignity and humanity of our trans siblings.'

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.