Practices of Spirit for Genderqueer and Transgender Christians

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Abstract The internalization of damaging messages has a negative impact on genderqueer and transgender Christians, when they seek to access faith resources during moments of challenge or life passages. The positive alternative can be transformative. In seeking the care of a pastoral counselor, a genderqueer or transgender person (trans* for short) may be seeking spiritual counter-orientation, so that they can build internal resources even as they access external resources for the living of their life. A combination of internal and external resources are important to overcome barriers for trans* people based on holistic oppression. This article maps out some of those aspects of oppression, to bring into view practices of spirit which can provide a positive alternative to dominant discourse, eliciting mental health and well-being.

Keywords Transgender, Counseling, Guilt, Shame, Fear, Disintegration, Creation, Community, Vocation, Integrity

Theology is rarely prescriptive for pastoral counselors. A methodology for each provider of care is based on that provider's sacred tradition, and may be carried out implicitly rather than explicitly. This article errs on the side of explicit theology and directive spiritual practices. After defining genderqueer and transgender experience within the range of human experience of

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gender, and after locating that experience within embodiment which also touches many factors and diverse socio-economic locations, this article will look at four theological factors that influence mental health and well-being for genderqueer and transgender people (trans* for short). Readers of this article are understood to be interested in accompanying trans* people on a spiritual journey, and to be able to make use of four types of faith practices that could resource mental health and well-being for the care-seeker. In lieu of the abusive practices of *guilt, shame, fear* and *disintegration*, Christian care-givers could offer regard for *creation*, attention to *community*, respect for *vocation*, and belief in *integration*. Practices in line with these four alternatives will be explored, with trans* voices pointing the way.

Definitions and Context

First, a word on definitions. Gender washes human beings in a convoluted bath of understandings and expectations, which are commonly separated out into gender identity, gender expression, and gender role (Greenberg, 2006). Gender identity is self-understanding, and does not depend on genital or chromosomal assumptions or assignments. It is one's internal sense of self, recognizable in introspective moments and not dependent on what others believe. Gender expression is how one presents to the world, comporting (or not) with one's own understanding of gender identity. One can express gender by dress, speech, hairstyle, pronouns and more. Gender role is the set of allowances, proscriptions or prescriptions a society puts on all the different gender identities within that society, marking boundaries differently over time and age. The existence of more rigid gender roles does not mean that all people will confine themselves to those roles. Gender is convoluted enough that many people (not just trans* people) benefit from

counseling, reflection, and conscious choice-making around exercise of stereotypes, privilege, and limiting behavior based on gender.

Trans* people are those who cannot easily get by without some kind of self-reflection and conscious choice-making around gender expression and gender roles, relative to internal gender identity, because there is something "between" or "across" about their gender identity, given the dominant two markers (M *or* F). A trans* person may be female, but believed to have been male at birth. A trans* person may be dual-gender, understanding themselves to be either male or female on different days. A trans* person may be androgynous, understanding themselves to be neither male nor female. Much clinical literature exists concerning transsexuals, who pursue needed access to medical care, hormones and/or surgical care for a congruent self-expression of gender identity (any degree of this is known as "gender transition" in female-to-male or male-to-female case studies). Yet in terms of the variety of gender, the clinically-presenting case may not be statistically or socially normative.

In the work of social change and theological reflection, non-binary transgender people came first, making space for gender diversity by defying societal conventions. This tradition is carried on by gender-nonconforming, gender-transgressing, and genderqueer people today who may name themselves within the trans* community but do not mean only transsexual. Meanwhile, some individuals use identifiers like "cross-dresser" to denote something they do part-time versus full-time, yet this is still very much part of their identity. Still other individuals participate in modes of gender within lesbian and gay communities which may blur the line between gender expression and more overt kinds of performance, i.e. drag performance, or queering it up across the butch/femme continuum. The boundaries on transgender experience are

blurry; but rather than clarify and police those boundaries, the care provider will accompany a person on their own exploration of the terrain.

A provider of care needs to identify their own biases and their own limitations to understanding the transgender spectrum, based on upbringing, enculturation, and personal experience of gender. Cisgender experience, unlike transgender experience, is generally that which has been congruent between gender identity and gender expression. Cisgender people may also seek medical and surgical care for their bodies, (i.e. cosmetic surgeries to counteract aging processes, or Lasik surgeries to enhance or repair impaired vision), but when they do it is perceived to be normative for their gender, not a change of gender. As far as gender role, many if not most cisgender people have engaged in "gender-bending" role behaviors, whether women in the military, stay-at-home dads, anyone falling in love with members of the same gender, or someone who has lost a job for having hair the perceived-wrong length. In contexts where social tolerance of diverse gendered behaviors is low, cisgender people may have something in common with trans* people, if they define part of their life story in terms of crossing or being in-between genders. Conversely, where social tolerance for multiple gender roles is higher, trans* people have something in common with cisgender people, in not having to define their lives by a struggle against others' expectations.

People who find they have the same story, enough or in part, often create a culture together, with shared language. That culture further shapes or contributes to the self-understandings and gender identities that others will create in the future. Because this is so, there is great diversity within the trans* experience. Trans* people of a certain age who manage risk by living 'low-disclosure' rather than 'coming out' as transsexuals are not necessarily participating in the same culture as younger genderqueer people who boldly organize for

LGBTQ progress. Likewise: those able to identify with disability are not necessarily in the same current as those who do not identify with disability. Intersex people may identify with queer, trans or disability movements or may not identify with these movements. Trans* people who have inherited male privilege participate in a somewhat different culture than trans* people who have inherited being the targets of sexism. Trans* people with HIV and/or who may have a background in sex work perhaps learn a different culture when they become parents of soccer-playing children. The landscape of multi-faceted identity is convoluted. Language changes through time, with numerous labels on "trans" identities showing this strain over the past decades (Paige, 2001).

The care provider is wise to be alert to issues that are more or less human issues, not always to be reduced to categorical identity when counseling an individual who happens to be trans*. Not all presenting issues should be collapsed into the gender "issue," and the care provider should be alert to avoid projecting personal work around gender onto the care-seeker, instead being prepared to resource and refer when limitations are identified. For the same reason, however, when considering the evolution of categories in the totality of life experience, not all trans* people need referral to a specialist for the reason that they need to explore gender.

Next, a word on socio-economic context. Just as gender is a complex feature of socialized embodiment, so are race, class, religion, ability/disability, sexual orientation, and ethnicity: all are complex features of enculturated existence. Some dynamics of oppression work similarly; some work in a multiplied fashion on the lives of people who may seek spiritual care and pastoral counseling. The first nationwide survey on transgender health found the worst outcomes for mental health among those people who had the lowest levels of employment, who were the most likely to be involved in the illicit economy, who faced the highest levels of police

harassment and who interacted most regularly with the prison system (Grant, Mottet, Tanis & Keisling, 2011). Trans women of color are most directly and negatively impacted by these factors. Not coincidentally, trans women of color are the demographic which is disproportionately represented each November on the Trans Day of Remembrance when names are called memorializing the lives lost to street violence and/or partner violence in the past year (Himschoot, 2009).

Mental health is not simply an outcome of good internal resources. It is also causally affected by external material conditions, namely the means to build a life and livelihood, or the lack thereof. For this reason, the annual Philadelphia Trans Health Conference promotes "health" as a combination of factors such as employment, education, dignity, choices, relationships, and also medical and mental health care; for the same reason, priorities identified by trans* leaders at a convening by the Arcus Foundation included criminalization, homelessness, and access to employment (Mananzala, 2014). Poverty linked to racism is not just job discrimination but also unequal history of equity and anti-wealth policies, so systemic that such racism-based poverty certainly will play out in churches and in the ability to access and to provide pastoral care. Providing affordable spiritual care to deal with despair and self-harm is important, in models that span individual, group and community settings. Meanwhile, faithful leaders appreciating their own social location can work theologically, prophetically, and pastorally to interrupt the cycle of multi-generational poverty, thereby reducing hyper-masculine, anti-gay and anti-woman forms of violence often perpetrated by men lacking sufficient social regard, dignity and self-respect.

When trans* people do seek care from a religious leader, some receive positive encouragement, such as Stonewall-significant historical figure Sylvia Rivera receiving a blessing from her Pentecostal pastor on her rite of passage to young adulthood as a girl (Duberman,

1994). Many more face abusive language, constraints or interventions designed to curtail their gender expression or repress their gender identity – supposedly based on theology (to be deconstructed below). Family members as well as trans* people can be susceptible to these messages, especially if the damaging messages come from well-intentioned people in trusted networks of belonging or positions of power. To redress the toxic internalization of those religiously-received messages, conscious effort toward critical reference points for faith may be helpful to activate the positive resources of an individual's spiritual tradition. Bridge figures and role models, as well as care-givers, may also help re-orient a trans* care-seeker to options, alternatives, choices, and empowerment, even while they find, foreground or create new or hybridized spaces in which to meet external needs.

Mental health and theology

In the afore-mentioned nationwide transgender survey, mental health and well-being were low across the trans* spectrum, compared to the general population (Grant, Mottet, Tanis & Keisling, 2011). Suicidality was high: 41% attempting suicide. By way of interpreting this statistic, although suicides are known to be common in the trans* community across age groups (Clements-Nolle, Marx & Katz, 2006), this is the case not because of something intrinsic to trans* people but because of the collusion of life-exterminating factors imposed upon trans* people. There is something powerful at work in the forces that conspire against a human spirit: the forces of guilt, shame, fear and disintegration. The same forces that work against employment and health, toward hate violence and over-incarceration, are the forces at work against an individual's own mind and emotions. Christianity has been complicit in this perpetration of harm: from marginalizing or denying the presence and history of gender-variant

leaders of faith (Lopez, 2014), to enshrining two strict genders in law and custom, to denigrating queer people, to excluding transgender people from choirs and bathrooms, church ministries and leadership. Four aspects of "insidious effort" identified as fear, guilt, shame, and inferiority were first noted by Vanessa Sheridan (2001, p. 80) and in this article are named guilt, shame, fear and disintegration.

Where Christian religion has been part of the injury, many trans* individuals nonetheless experience it as a source of healing: from singing of spiritual songs; to prayer and meditation (Tigert & Tirabassi, 2004); from proclaimed testimony to acts of dedication; from the liberative and transformative meaning of the Sacraments to an embodied incorporation of paradox at its theological core. In addition, trans* people of faith are reclaiming with pride gender-variant figures from biblical and church history (Rohrer, 2011; Swenson, 2005; Toscano, 2012). Practices of spirit that manifest life and hope include regard for creation, a value on community, respect for vocation, and belief in integration. Each of these four strands will be examined in turn, to spin a thread that for some may be a lifeline.

Guilt / Creation

The first misguided message trans* people hear is one of guilt. The logic of guilt-producing messages often follows this form: "What is rare is odd; what is odd is bad; don't be bad." If one is outside the norm (or norms) of gender, and this is a core feature of one's self, there really is not any way to not be that. So the message of guilt is inescapable and ineradicable, except by self-annihilation. This annihilative force of overwhelming guilt is repetitive and cumulative, and causes one layer of injury against a trans* person who wants to be a good – i.e. normal – person. This is false equation, of course. What is good is not normal, and what is normal is not good, necessarily; nor is what is exceptional, bad! The practice of Jesus was the

practice of a sage who pointed to a lot of things in the natural world and said, "Look," or "Consider" (Matthew 12:24; Luke 6:8). Jesus' belief was the belief in a Creator who was the Source of the mustard tree and the bird in its branches, the One responsible for the seed and the grain, and all kinds of mysteries therein (Mark 4). To the extent that the modern mind can re-conceive of such mysteries, and hold them with humility, then the small thing of sideburns and hand lotion – "his and hers" – becomes a matter for curiosity and learning, not pre-judging and condemning.

Actions and activities abound for the trans* person to begin to regard creation, and all life within creation, as a startling and beautiful, complicated and nuanced thing – in which gender ceases to be defined as a matter of sin or sinfulness. *For example: Read the Psalms – outdoors. Contemplate the Grand Canyon. Study quasars. Stare at a sunset for the sake of awe. Collect rocks. Grow something in the Earth. With joy and laughter, discover that pink and blue are both part of the sky; redwoods reproduce three different ways; juniper trees change their sex every so often; tadpoles and frogs could be considered two different species.* The Creator of all may have a special place for humankind; but theistic faith cannot be so anthropocentric as to tell God, considering this great variety, that God got it wrong (in all but two cases). Science can be an agent of faithful revelation, according to Pat Conover, who says Christians "are drawn to an interest in the embeddedness of spirit in the midst of life" (2002, p.15). Isherwood and Stuart (1998) derive affirmation of every body from a cosmic Christ, process thought, and eco-theology. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott says: "There is no eternal or real separation between Creator and creation" (2001, p.86). Trans* people have proceeded to show reverence for the Creator by having a certain kind of humility in light of the complex diversity of all creation.

Shame / Community

Having grounded oneself with humility in relationship to one's creative Creator, one can next examine the misguided message of shame, the idea that: "If you're not like us, you can't be one of us." This message is one that humans send each other, out of fear or defensiveness, to preserve an in-group with some degree of homogeneity or purity. The impact is that the shamed person feels they do not belong, but instead feels that their people have rejected them. The impact on a trans* person is loneliness, stifling and incredible loneliness. Jesus was not known for imposing any such separation and alienation, nor being concerned with preconceived contamination. Rather he blurred ingroup and outgroup distinctions, interrupting stigma-based divisions on the way to creating new community (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:9). Loving relationships among people not only allow for communion with the Divine, but also with one another, accepting change and growth along the way. Community is comparatively flexible in distinction to the practice of rigid conformity. Community in the Spirit is what Jesus promised when the Comforter would gather and lead individuals together in mutual forgiveness and provision for each one's needs.

Actions and activities that create community, even when a trans* person feels forsaken and alone, can help them move to perceive and add relationships of support as necessary. *For example: Draw a map of one's family networks, and identify those who are tolerant members at the present time. Then draw friend networks, moving on to community groups and spaces. This is a form of asset mapping, and may draw out grief and sadness but also the creativity of making choices and turning over new leaves. Attend support group meetings and/or conferences. Form relationships of positive regard whether through the ball scene, or through the workplace – and keep doing it, whether those relationships mirror one aspect of your identity or more than one.*

Those who are able to form community, with safeguards for an increasingly holistic referential fabric for all parts of themselves including their gender identity and expression, promote the greatest resilience in themselves. Educator Louis Mitchell says, "Resilience and connectedness are key in the transgender community to dealing with a certain amount of risk and vulnerability" (Mitchell, 2013: Lecture Notes).

Such resiliency networks can be formed by/among children, youth, families, adults, and seniors – in schools, activist groups, support groups, or religious spaces. Churches that are expressly welcoming (Open and Affirming) of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are helpful: the knowledge that congregations are capable of holding theology in which God is not limited by human bias can alleviate shame on a widespread level. Living out the welcome within one congregation is of course more difficult than proclaiming it, because the dynamics of difference come with power differentials. Work toward diversity and justice continues within communities, if they are to perform as true spiritual communities over time (Forbes, 2001).

Fear / Vocation

The third message which is spirit-threatening, soul-expiring, life-denying to trans* people is a message of fear. When aware of hate crimes, rape, assault, relationship loss, precedent under the law for loss of spouse and children, job loss, health discrimination, and daily micro-aggressions from paperwork to locker rooms; ongoing anxiety can be the result. The message of fear says that loss is normal, that safety is unlikely, and that a negative past predicts a negative future. It coaches individuals to stay in a small, contained place where they will attract no attention and be in no danger. To a degree, caution may be adaptive for survival. And yet an unwieldy degree of fear is the internalized form of homophobia/transphobia. This form of phobia damages oneself even before any perpetrator can. Managing anxiety, mending a personal feeling

of security, and fending off phobia takes courage. Courage comes from a sense of purpose, which is also what Jesus offered when he said, "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19; Matthew 9:9; Mark 10:21; Luke 9:23; John 10:27). Religious rituals promote courage when they help people embrace their spiritual vocation, their sacred purpose in life, which is beyond fear of loss but which promotes unique gifts and contributions that can be shared with others.

Actions and activities to deepen the blessings of vocation for trans* people include some of the practices at the core of traditional Christian faith. Tanis (2003) explores "call" and "calling" for trans* people as that purpose which is nurtured in an individual's life when they commit to a journey, show up to God, and discover what they will become. Rites and rituals within Christianity help people discover and affirm their calling, dedicating themselves unambiguously to life when faced with death. *For instance: baptism (and re-naming) ceremonies; communion with liturgy of counter-memory and liberation; shared testimony and praise; Bible stories of the brave.* Also in the church tradition are practices commonly enshrined in ministries of care, advocacy and outreach. *Name your losses. Grieve them. Hear others' stories/histories/herstories of survival and overcoming; tell yours. Research where progress is needed, and what progress has been made. Use arts, events, campaigns, or groups to build power*. In whatever ways individuals tap into their vocation, they discover something that transcends fear and promotes appropriate courage. Aligning oneself with core purpose deepens a sense of well-being and satisfaction, and occasions surprise and discovery together with others.

In light of sacred vocation pursued in and through the activities of daily living, pastor and blogger Lawrence Richardson (2014) exhorts a trans*-specific practice of "showing up":

"My message to every trans and gender non-conforming person reading this is: 'God is love and you were made in the image of perfect Love. There is space for you in this world. There is space

at your church, in your desired career, in your family, on sports teams…and it is time to take your space. Show up! In large numbers or in small…your presence is valued and necessary. So when they stare or ask questions, answer them. Look them in the eyes proudly with your beautiful, handsome, artsy, brilliant, capable, transgendered self. Claim your space. Rearrange the seating to make room at the table. Correct people when they use the wrong pronouns. Hang up your own sign on the bathroom door. Tell them who you are and who you are not. Be bold. " Such a spiritual practice, with God's help, builds its own enthusiasm and courage in place of dread and anxiety.

Disintegration / Integrity

The last misguided message trans* people hear is the message of disintegration, based on dualism: either/or, mind/body, soul/*sarx*, boy/girl, straight/gay. Dualism's message is: "you have to choose *one*." Dualism and hierarchy together combine to subjugate the feminine, in comparison with the masculine, likewise ranking mind over and apart from body. Many religious dichotomies follow the same path: (i.e. in neglect of Earth, prefer heaven; in neglect of the poor, prefer the rich; the male rules over the female as clergy rule over the church). Early Christian testimony preferred paradox to any of these, however. Jesus was understood to upend the dualistic and hierarchical order of the Great Chain of Being, by saying "The last shall be first" (Matthew 19:20) and "Do to the least of these as you would do to me" (Matthew 25:40). Belief in Jesus' resurrection later further pushed the matter of flesh and spirit together, as did all the miracles of feeding and healing and blessing by the early Church, as did the fact that women and men and eunuchs together went about proclaiming prophecy fulfilled (see Matthew 19:12; Acts 8:36). The doctrine of the Incarnation left the impression of God's humble power in mortal vulnerability on Earth, counter-intuitively linked to immortal celestial might. Christianity has

carried on this tradition of power reversal variously, or not very well, over time. Yet the paradox of spirituality in embodiment can be recognized through the simple things: practices of potlucks and fasting; rising and kneeling to pray; anointing the sick; incense to smell; chimes to hear; and all manner of traditions that center spirituality in embodiment.

The integration of distinct possibilities that might all be true is a marker of spiritual maturity. When trans* people return with maturity to any earlier-imposed limits of dualism, they may make body modifications, or they may make interpretations for other people to come along on their gender identity/expression journey. They may request community rituals, assert pronouns, or reclaim earlier photos and relationships. Stand-to-pee urinary devices for men and voice lessons for women might represent 'passing' and fitting-in to a false 'normal' for gender; or, such interventions might represent milestones toward interpersonal regard and affirmation of self. The same steps could function in both ways, or neither – not every trans* person will have the same needs. Myths and stereotypes abound concerning hormonal experience, yet each person's unique embodied experience is valid for them. Negotiating sexual practices is fundamentally about security rather than insecurity, leading to agency and safe choices. Family members, loved ones and professionals close to trans* people can consult extensive first-person accounts in comparison with current medical standards for more information.

Distinct individuals will enact particular investments to incorporate wholeness of body/mind, femininity/masculinity, flesh/spirit, journey/home. Spanning or transcending gender categories, however paradoxical that might be, trans* people embrace new possibility as a matter of faith. Actions and activities that promote the integration of paradox and possibility for trans* people are numerous. *Walk the labyrinth. Journal. Paint. Fall in love. Read theology – while doing fitness activities. Pray through the postures of a day, through the seasons of a year; pray*

at a birth and at a funeral. See a doctor – and like yourself afterward. Dance. Answer a child's question on a true level. Keep silence. Breathe.

Summary

In summary, practices of spirit are alive and well among trans* people, although each year many trans* people consider suicide, and the prevention of suicide should be among the considerations of pastoral care providers. Undoubtedly, more trans* academics and religious care providers are emerging everywhere (Terry, 2013), and will more fully develop advice, techniques, theories and methodologies in years to come. This article covers some preliminary Christian concepts related to dealing with guilt, shame, fear, and disintegration, by focusing on what a trans* person can do to pursue reverence for creation, community, vocation and integration.

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