

“Becoming Who We Are”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, April 18, 2021

Today’s reading is “Telling,” by Laura Hershey

What you risk telling your story:

You will bore them.

Your voice will break, your ink
spill and stain your coat.

No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.

You will park yourself forever
on the outside, your differentness once
and for all revealed, dangerous.

The names you give to yourself
will become epithets.

Your happiness will be called
bravery, denial.

Your sadness will justify their pity.

Your fear will magnify their fears.

Everything you say will prove something about
their god, or their economic system.

Your feelings, that change day
to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place,
brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do
with you.

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Those with power can afford
to tell their story
or not.

Those without power
risk everything to tell their story,
and must.

Someone, somewhere,
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.

Sermon: “Becoming Who We Are”

February 10 was the three-year anniversary of my ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister. On that day in 2018 people from the Salem UU, then my home congregation, and First Unitarian-Portland, where I was serving, gathered to mark the occasion. My family traveled from back East to attend this joyous celebration.

In the UU tradition, a minister takes the title of Reverend when ordained. After the weekend of ceremony and celebration, my niece, who was 12 at the time, asked me, “So, do we call you Rev. Aunt Mary now?” She was grinning as she asked, as if she was teasing, but I could see that there was a bit of seriousness in her question too. She had experienced a rite of passage for me, and I believe was wondering, “Are you the same Aunt Mary that I know? Have you changed?” I said that I was the same and different, both at the same time. I assured her that I was still Aunt Mary, and she didn’t need to call me Reverend, but that some people would and it was part of who I was now.

Ministry is a new profession in my family, and none of the ministers I knew growing up in the Lutheran church looked like me. I didn’t fit with what I had experienced about

ministers, so the process of hearing a call to ministry and becoming one was new to me and my family.

When I meet people and tell them who I am and what I do, I hear lots of assumptions. It's clear that I am not Catholic because the Catholic church has priests, not ministers, and, in the "official" church anyway, priests are men. Often people assume that I am Christian, that I believe in the God that they have been taught about, and that I will be offended if they swear. Those assumptions have much more to do with them and their experience, not much to do with me.

In the UU tradition and others, the path to ministry is called "ministerial formation." For me, the process of becoming a minister was of unbecoming all that I have been told about who I was and who ministers are, who God is, what religion is, and what is holy. It was and is as much about letting go as it is about becoming.

For the month of April, our spiritual theme is "Becoming." In reflecting on this theme, I was taken with what Albert Schweitzer wrote, "The path of awakening is not about becoming who you are. Rather it is about unbecoming who you are not."

There are many paths of becoming and unbecoming. My process of becoming a minister was one. The path of people who identify as non-binary, queer, trans or gender questioning is another. I am grateful for several trans and non-binary people in our community who helped me explore this topic and who helped me learn.

Before I go further, let me define some words. You'll see in the chat a link to the Genderbread person, which is a fun graphic to help understand gender identity, gender expression, anatomical sex, and attraction.

[Link in chat: <https://www.genderbread.org/resource/genderbread-person-v4-0>]

Today I am going to speak mostly about gender identity, that is how a person identifies themselves with respect to man-ness or woman-ness. A person may say that they are a man or a woman, a combination of genders or neither gender. Gender is a continuum, **both-and**, rather than a binary, this **or** that.

Someone who identifies as non-binary says that the gender binary of male or female doesn't reflect who they are, they are something else or a combination of genders.

Transgender is a term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Cisgender, or "cis" c-i-s for short, is the term for someone whose gender identity and assigned sex are the same.

The term queer is one that has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community to describe anyone who is not straight or cisgender.

Someone who is gender questioning might be wondering whether they identify as a man, a woman or another gender. They might also be experimenting with different genders.

Last, gender expression is how a person publicly expresses or presents their gender. This can include behavior and outward appearance and can also include a person's chosen name and pronouns.

These terms may have a different meaning for a person who uses them, so it is important to listen and to ask.

With those words as a foundation, let's look at a few differences and similarities between journeys of becoming--the path to ministry and gender identity and exploration.

One difference is that being a minister isn't usually too risky; my life has not been threatened because I am a minister. The lives of those who are non-binary are

endangered here in the US as well as elsewhere. The Human Rights Campaign reports that 2020 was the most violent and deadly year ever for trans and non-binary people. And 2021 already looks to be another deadly year. Being non-binary or trans is risky to livelihood, relationship, and life itself.

A second difference is that being a minister can carry power and authority, even respect. Those who are non-binary and trans often experience loss of power, authority and respect. I want to acknowledge these significant differences.

And there are some similarities. There is a deep discernment about identity-who am I? What have I been told about who I am and what do I know to be true? Do these things match? What if they don't? What is the cost of being who I know myself to be?

Another similarity is that identity may change over time and in different contexts. It was 16 years between my first call to ministry and my ordination. While the title will remain with me for the rest of my life, my ministry has and will change over time. And there are places where I am not "Reverend" but an aunt, or sister, daughter, neighbor, friend.

Some who are non-binary and trans know themselves quite young, others develop this awareness over time. And the knowledge itself changes over time. Our identities change as we grow and change, and as our context and culture changes. For some, being trans or non-binary is more possible now than it may have been when they were younger. For some, being their true self may be possible in some settings but not in others, for safety, livelihood and other reasons. It's fluid, like life is fluid.

Another similarity is the words we use to present ourselves to the world, a world that has supremacy culture and oppression. I make decisions about if and when I use the title "Reverend." For example, during the search process, the OUUC Search Team asked how I wanted to be addressed. Initially I said that Mary was fine. Over time, as I learned more about OUUC and did my own discernment, I asked to be addressed as Rev. Mary.

This decision was based in part on my own experiences of misogyny, not only in general but in our denomination. While it is no longer unusual that UU ministers are women, our congregations still reflect the cultural bias that religious leaders are male, as was true for a longtime in UU tradition. I recall an exchange with a male minister colleague not long ago. When he learned that now those who identify as women make up almost half of UU ministers, he said to me, "You are taking over!" I noted that no one said such a thing when UU ministers were 99% men. Even though women are half of UU ministers, the archetype is the male minister and oppression still exists. I use the title Reverend in part because I don't fit the archetype.

For those who are gender non-conforming, non-binary, trans or queer, words also matter. We know that a supremacist culture defines what is "normal" and that what is outside that small center is defined as less than, abnormal, broken. It's oppression in another form and the same suppression of the reality of human diversity.

The words that are important for identity are how people choose to be addressed, what name they use and their pronouns. Someone who is trans or non-binary may choose a name different than the one their parents gave them at birth, and they may choose several names over the course of their lifetime. They may choose to use he/him or she/her or they/them or other pronouns to identify who they are. People use pronouns to remind others of who they are.

Choosing and changing how to be addressed is not new. Women who take vows as Catholic nuns are given a name different than their birth name to indicate their change in identity and vocation. People who marry sometimes change their name to indicate the change in their identity. As we grow and change, how we want to be addressed may change. And we support each other by recognizing and affirming those shifts and changes in how we address others in our community.

Over this past year, we've invited the use of pronouns as we introduce ourselves in Zoom breakout rooms after the service and in meetings and we encourage each other to listen for and use the pronouns that a person provides. Someone may choose not to offer their pronouns, asking instead to be addressed by their name. What we seek to avoid is making assumptions about gender or making light of pronouns.

For those of us who identify as straight and cisgender, sharing our pronouns positions us as allies against transphobia, which is the oppression of others for their gender identity or gender expression. When we share our pronouns, we normalize the practice of listening to what people want to be called and then doing so. It is an act of welcome, of hospitality, and of justice.

For some of us, introducing ourselves with our pronouns is new, and new can sometimes be uncomfortable. Those of us of a certain age were raised with the gender binary and some of us learned rigid expectations of gender expression. We were taught how men and women should look and behave, and that "they" was for groups of people, not a single person. Now we are being asked to unlearn what we were taught; we are "unbecoming" what we were told we were and what we were told others were. And, if that is uncomfortable or hard, it is our work to unravel why; it is our work, not the work of the people asking us to know them for who they are. We can be curious about what our discomfort is. Is it an unconscious habit? Fear of doing something wrong? Grief about change? Something in our own experience?

For some of us sharing our name and pronouns is just what we do. For others, it has been lifesaving. A declaration of pronouns can be a profound statement of identity. Being recognized in community for who we say we are is affirming; to have our real selves invited and welcomed is extraordinary and revolutionary.

The spiritual journey of becoming is not just for us as individuals, it is also for our community. Recently many of you participated in the process to develop a new vision, mission and ends for OUUC. The amazing Writing Team distilled many words down to

just a few, and some of those words are the proposed OUUC mission based on the interdependent web. It says we:

- · Welcome and Wonder
- · Embrace and Empower
- · Bridge and Become

If we are to be truly welcoming and empowering on our path to becoming, we may have to unlearn hurtful habits and learn to welcome each other as we understand ourselves to be. And that is one of the purposes of a faith community. As Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt said in our opening words, church is not a place to hide. Rather,

Church is the place where we stand with one another, look the world in the eye, attempt to see clearly, and gather strength to face what we see with courage, and yes, with joy.

In the Fall, we will have a ceremony of installation where we, the congregation and I, covenant together. For me the installation is a formal declaration of how we will be together in our shared ministry, how we are relationship to each other and to the larger world. I am honored that Zoe Meyers and Neil Weinberg are leading the efforts to coordinate this ritual and celebration. Stay tuned for more information.

But it doesn't take rites of passage or rituals for us to practice our own becoming and supporting the becoming of others. We do so every time we are together, in worship, in breakout rooms, in congregational gatherings, in meetings and covenant groups. Whenever we are in relationship, even for a short amount of time, we have the opportunity to support our own growth and the becoming of others.

The practice is to notice when others share their truest selves and welcome that gift. We won't always get it right and the practice is to try and try again. It's about connection, not perfection. It's to notice when we are challenged or uncomfortable and investigate our own opportunity for learning and growth. The practice is to love each other in our wholeness.

Who we are together matters. And it is love, not fear, that will change the world.
May we love each other into our truest being and becoming.