

At Home Inside Ourselves

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Have you ever had the feeling that you weren't at home inside yourself?

Years ago, after spending ten or eleven months studying at Cambridge University, I decided to come back to the states by the long way. So I caught a cheap student flight to Istanbul and trickled down through the seven cities of the Book of Revelations before crossing to the Greek islands and thence to Athens and a flight back to the United States.

It was a wondrous journey. The ruins of Turkey, going back to the Homeric age, but coming forward through almost every subsequent epoch of history, were fabulous. The food was exciting. The mode of transportation, often in overloaded minibuses with some passengers up on the roof, was daunting to say the least. I was able to store up memories that are with me still.

But time and again, I would turn this corner or that and find myself in a place where I wasn't at home inside myself.

It was a momentary thing caused by a total cultural upheaval, and I'm willing to give myself some of the blame. But in those moments long ago, I knew that I was in the wrong place. My very body, my very dress gave me away as being in the wrong place - as coming from somewhere else; as being the wrong person - dangerous, to be feared. And that frightened me as much as those around me.

I'd spent a year abroad already - and in a country where people laughed at me when I pronounced Norwich *Norwhich* or said *half* instead of *half* and it all slid right over me. A bit later I spent three years on an island where I had a different skin tone from the inhabitants and almost all the people didn't speak a language I could understand - doing so with no concern. But here was something different in the Middle East all those years ago. In some little side street, some minuscule village or country road, I would suddenly find myself in the midst of others feeling that I totally didn't belong - that I never really could belong.

Thank heaven I haven't felt that way since then! Thank heaven it was a passing thing. And remember that I

acknowledge my part in those feelings as well as the part of those about me.

For some people, however, this isn't the case. Every day they waken in the wrong world to be surrounded through their waking hours by people who see them in the wrong way and who are willing to punish them for daring to be so different when they never had asked to be who they are in the first place. These people are gay, they are lesbian, they are bisexual and they are transgender.

In one light they are simply people. But for too many others, they are an affront.

We can be thankful that some of the old fears parading as hatreds and wrapping themselves in violence have fallen by the wayside more recently - at least to some extent. There are many who have shed themselves of past homophobias or at least have tried to open themselves to gays and lesbians and bisexuals in their community. There are many who have worked to make their communities more open to gays and lesbians and bisexuals so that many have found it possible to come out of the closet and acknowledge their sexual identities. Our denomination has placed itself squarely in the forefront of these efforts.

But this situation is not as true for the transgender community as for gays and lesbians and bisexuals. As the little questionnaire in today's bulletin points out, the civil rights movement for transgender people is really just starting and is probably some 25 years behind the struggle for gay rights, and very few places have laws protecting the rights of transgender people, or judges who are willing to interpret the law so that rights of transgender people are protected. So they are arrested for using the wrong public facilities. They are refused appropriate changing rooms in department stores. When arrested, they are headed into cells with what is for them the wrong gender. They are required to use stealth in being who they are.

Let us be clear: the term transgender is an umbrella term used to describe cross dressers/transvestites, third gender people who don't feel at home when the male or female description is applied to themselves, intersexuals who were born with bodies that are part male and part female, and transsexuals who just don't feel that they were born with the right sexual equipment. There is one other

group that fits into the transgender community, and that is people who self-identify as such.

It's a pretty broad umbrella, but it comes together because each of these groups doesn't feel at home in the bodies they received at birth. "God's little joke," as some of them have said. Small wonder that they often take major steps to deal with the problem.

I say *they* take steps. For years it was considered appropriate when an intersexed child was born to decide what sex they should be and to make them the one or the other *right at birth*. Stories still abound of little girls who grew up feeling that they were boys and vice versa only to discover that there was a reason: that under medical urging, parents had decided to do what they thought was best and had deprived their children of a choice they could have rightly made for themselves at a later date. This is a topic that figures prominently in *Middlesex*, the relatively recent novel by Jeffrey Eugenides.

Steps *can* be taken, but something of this magnitude should be decided *by* the individual and not *for* that person - especially when the decision is made by parents at birth, and often with the concurrence of a Neanderthal medical community.

Why society is so frightened by the transgender community is beyond me. Is it lavatories? I remember years ago, in Europe, going into the men's room at the same time that the woman I was with went into the women's. The doors were side by side. And once we went through the doors, we found ourselves face to face on the other side. I never saw the lavatory problem in the same light thereafter.

I remember a batch of cub scouts who were beside themselves trying to figure out if it was all right to use the women's room if they couldn't find the one with the magic word "Men" blazoned on the door. They finally decided they could do so if one of their own made the ultimate sacrifice of waiting longer and standing guard outside.

I used to take my eldest daughter swimming years ago, and after the swim we would go into the men's room to shower. There she would sit, stark naked under a shower, absorbing the heat. No one thought anything of it. Of course it was a different era, and she was a wee might of a thing, but I often think the naturists have something right from which many of us could learn. And I'm glad that our

new building will have at least one intersexed facility along with the separate men's room and women's room. And I trust that any man - self defined - will be allowed into the men's room and any woman - self defined - will be allowed into the women's room. A lot of our churches and fellowships are going toward single stall facilities open to all, thereby making gender issues a thing of the past. It's not a bad idea.

Again, are we afraid of the transgender community because we are afraid of ourselves? I've often thought that of homophobia. I know too many gays who got married to straights to prove that they weren't who they were, and I've known gay-bashers who were reacting violently against their own proclivities rather than those of any other.

Well, I can think of times as a boy when I wondered what wearing a bra was like. Get caught trying one on, though, and it might scare the bejesus out of you for a lifetime. Inquisitiveness could be transformed into terror. And perhaps the terror would be magnified by the degree a person is uncomfortable in their own bodies.

Whatever the reason, I know of no transgender person who changed their lifestyle if not their bodies without profound consideration. And I'm thankful to be a part of a religious grouping that has worked to honor members of the transgender community - a denomination that has established an Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns at its headquarters.

I've been in several of our congregations that were blessed with transgender members. In each case they were welcomed and made to feel at home. I remember one dear woman who seemed a bit mannish - and also a bit dowdy if you'll pardon a comment she once made of herself. She came to worship regularly and was honored by all and treated as a dear friend by many. She left us when the time for her surgery finally came, but on the last Sunday before her departure, she got up during the joys and concerns to light a candle and say how thankful she had been that she had found and was welcomed into our caring community where she could be herself without let or hindrance. It was a welcoming community as we proclaim ourselves to be. I trust the same could be said of us by any transgender person who found herself or himself coming to our congregation. But there's always room for us to learn more.

So let me give you an invitation: this coming Wednesday, at 7 p.m., as a part of our adult education drop-in series, we'll be watching "Different for Girls," a good show about a transgender relationship. The following week, we'll be talking of transgender issues with transgender people. These are real opportunities - opportunities to learn, to have a bit of fun together, "to try the water" as the old saying goes, and to deepen our sense of the worth of all peoples.

I hope you come. I hope you bring a friend or two. And I hope we all grow through these presentations. It's not fair to not be at home in our own bodies. We shouldn't wish it for ourselves or any other. And wherever we are, we should work to help everyone feel profoundly at home.

Amen.