

“The nutritionist said I should eat root vegetables.
Said if I could get down thirteen turnips a day
I would be grounded, rooted.
Said my head would not keep flying away
to where the darkness lives.

The psychic told me my heart carries too much weight.
Said for twenty dollars she’d tell me what to do.
I handed her the twenty. She said, “Stop worrying, darling.
You will find a good man soon.”

The first psycho therapist told me to spend
three hours each day sitting in a dark closet
with my eyes closed and ears plugged.
I tried it once but couldn’t stop thinking
about how gay it was to be sitting in the closet.

The yogi told me to stretch everything but the truth.
Said to focus on the out breath. Said everyone finds happiness
when they care more about what they give
than what they get.

The pharmacist said, “Lexapro, Lamicat, Lithium, Xanax.”

The doctor said an anti-psychotic might help me
forget what the trauma said.

The trauma said, “Don’t write these poems.
Nobody wants to hear you cry
about the grief inside your bones.”

But my bones said, “Tyler Clementi jumped
from the George Washington Bridge
into the Hudson River convinced
he was entirely alone.”

My bones said, “Write the poems.”
— **Andrea Gibson, The Nutritionist**

I am 5 years old. At our log cabin home in the woods, I frequently forego a t-shirt during warm weather, even though I know that only boys are supposed to do this. I hear the school bus coming up the hill to drop off the afternoon kids, and run to wave at the driver as it passes, like I do every day. At the last minute, I remember that there is something shameful in the way I am dressed, and hide behind the woodpile, wishing I had been born a boy.

I have heard my mom tell people that she was sure, while she was pregnant, that I would be born a boy. She knew it in her bones, she had dreams about it. She was shocked when I came out a girl. I was shocked too.

While shopping for back to school clothing, my mom refuses to buy me the jeans I have asked for, the baggy boys jeans with lots of pockets. Instead, she buys me the supershort white denim shorts I show no interest in. I am walking home one hot Saturday wearing these shorts when a car full of men drives by, whistling and catcalling me. I never wear the shorts again. I am 14.

At the church I attend with my family, members are frequently invited to speak from the pulpit those things they believe god is saying to them. I am maybe 16, but the church encourages young people to be involved, and I go to the microphone to make some impassioned statement (probably about Jesus or something). The community of adults who know me receive my words warmly, and I step down. Immediately after, a woman steps up to the microphone. She is new to our church – I have never met her. She likes what I had to say, and wants to encourage the church further on that point, calling me a young man. All around me, people smile, and a quiet murmur of amusement ripples through the congregation. I know that after church, someone will correct that woman, and she will feel embarrassed. I will not correct her, and I am not embarrassed.

I have been living in a different city than my family for several years. In that time, I have allowed my hair to grow long, and become involved in athletic pursuits that have changed my body. I have grown thin and fit, and wear clothing that, while still boyish in many ways, fits better than the baggy punk-rock style that defined my adolescence. I visit my family in the summer, and something has changed. A tension has lifted from my mothers face when she looks at me. I suppose I look like the daughter she had been hoping I would grow into. My whole family reacts to me in a way that feels distinct from anything I have felt from them before. They seem relieved that I have given up the tomboy look, and they speak to me as an adult of equal standing. After my visit, I scroll through the photos they have posted on Facebook, and I don't recognize myself in any of them.

My wife and I get together with her friends from high school and their spouses. The husbands leave to do something stereotypically manly, like shoot guns, or billiards, while the ladies stay to catch up. I watch the men go, not having been invited, and stand awkwardly at the margins of the conversation.

This is who I am. In a society that insists on sorting every person into one of two boxes, I can only ever stand awkwardly in margins. I watch the person ringing up my order search me for clues. I seem them looking for the swell of breasts or adam's apple, so that they will know which category I belong in. If they are busy or distracted, they will assume I should be called "Sir" until they hear my voice, and apologize profusely, their face turning red. I assure them it's fine, but they apologize a second, a third time. It wasn't a big deal, but now it's a scene. They don't know they got it right the first time. They don't know that they are putting people in boxes, even as they do so compulsively, automatically, with their words. All I want is to pay for my sandwich.

Most days, these moments are like mosquitos. I can swat them away as they arrive. Sometimes, the bugs are so bad I don't want to go outside.

I am, according to the nomenclature of my people, a masculine-of-center genderqueer person. The wider world calls me, when I am not around, of course, a butch dyke. There is tension between those two phrases, one which describes my outer expression as well as my inner identity, and the other, which is something of a slur intended to indicate which stereotypes I correspond to.

This tension, between inner truth and the expectations of the world outside can grow so great, that for many people it is unbearable. The young man who was referenced in the poem I read, *The Nutritionist* by Andrea Gibson, was a college student at Rutgers University in 2010. When Tyler Clementi's roommate found out that Tyler was gay, he set up his webcam to record Tyler during an intimate moment, and invited friends to view it with him, posting the event online. When Tyler learned that he was being viewed and mocked online, he committed suicide by jumping from the George Washington Bridge.

It would be easy to isolate this incident in Tyler's life and ask how this one moment of embarrassment drove him to end his life, but I would ask you to consider the more likely scenario: This episode was only the latest, and perhaps the most humiliating, of a lifetime of overwhelming tension. Tyler had only recently come out, having spent most of his life hiding his true self from even his closest relationships – Parents, siblings and friends, the scaffolding which supports most of us through our formative years. For him, what is meant to be a support system exerted tremendous pressure to fit a mold that almost certainly felt like a straightjacket. (pardon the pun)

Tyler was not alone. Suicide among youth in the LGBTQ community is roughly 4 times that of the general population. Most researchers in the field agree that this is not because LGBTQ children have a higher propensity for mental health problems or suicidal inclinations, but because of the effect of rejection, violence, and stigmatization of society at large. Even the constant public discussion around marriage equality and rights for transgender people can have a negative effect on people who are constantly being reminded that they are different, that their humanity should require debate.

One of the debates our country is currently engaging in is whether transpeople should be permitted to use the public restrooms that correspond with their gender identity. The insistence that a transwoman should be required to use a male restroom (or vice versa) is, at its root, a requirement that transpeople subject themselves not only to tremendous inner tension, but also to a significant risk of violence in order to engage in public life. Most straight, cis-gender people are not aware of this, but public restrooms remain one of the most dangerous locations for transpeople.

Here I'm quoting from an article by the Daily Beast about violence against transgender people in bathrooms

"In 2008, the Williams Institute at UCLA conducted a survey of transgender people in D.C. and found that 70 percent of respondents had experienced difficulties using public restrooms.

Eighteen percent said they had been denied access, 68 percent reported verbal harassment, and 9 percent said that they had experienced physical assault.

There have been alarming and brutal cases of violence against transgender people in restrooms. In 2011, for example, a young transgender woman named Chrissy Lee Polis was beaten for using a Maryland McDonald's restroom while an employee filmed the incident instead of protecting her."

I have never personally been assaulted for using a public restroom, but it is worth mentioning that I receive odd looks nearly every time I find myself in a multi-user restroom with a stranger, and have been verbally accosted on several occasions. Every time I find myself faced with two doors, each emblazoned with their gender specific symbols (men being naked, and women wearing a superhero cape) I am presented with a question to which there is no appropriate answer. I am reminded that I am one small oddly colored fish, in what can sometimes feel like an ocean of sharks.

This moment in my talk feels dark, but don't worry. I'm about to turn a corner.

The good news is that studies comparing trans kids to cisgender kids show that when children are allowed to socially transition within a supportive network, they show only minimally elevated anxiety. The phrase "socially transition" here means that those in the child's life agree to call that child by their chosen name, use the gender pronouns that are preferred by the child, and the child is permitted to dress and present themselves as they like. This requires minimal effort from their social circles, but it makes a world of difference to the child when they are able to move in the world as the person they are inside, regardless of the accident of birth that dictates what the world expects from them.

Isn't it amazing that we can change a child's life, simply by believing what they tell us about who they are?

Isn't it amazing that, if we can only put aside our preconceived ideas, we can mitigate so much sadness and pain?

It's easy to forget, when the conversation is framed as pertaining to transpeople, or gender non-conformance, that we are all, every single one of us, subject to this tension. The first thing the world learns about you, aside from the fact that you were born, is whether you are a boy, or a girl. Along with this diagnosis, based solely on the genitalia you possess, comes a story about who you are, how much energy you have, whether you are a handful or not. Which toys you prefer to play with, what colors you like. What standard of behavior will be tolerated from you. All of these dictates are placed on you long before you are able to know whether they are correct or not. As you grow older, you may find out that certain things you are interested in are not appropriate for a person with your body. Perhaps you are more or less welcome in certain clubs or occupations. You are not permitted to express your emotions in certain ways. Perhaps you are too sensitive for a person possessing one set of genitalia. Or perhaps you have the other set, and you are not sensitive enough.

What is all of this for? And if it is normal and natural to divide ourselves along these lines, why do we have to work so hard to enforce the boundaries of masculine and feminine, even to the point of assaulting those who do not conform to the standard?

Now pull yourself back, away from the consideration of gender, and think only about who you are at your core. What constitutes your deepest hopes and desires. What do your bones say to you?

Who are you to the world outside? Who does your community think you are? What does the world require of you? Are these things the same? Are you able to move in your circle of influence with truth and sincerity?

I would expect that the tension between these two people, who you are, and who the world thinks you are, is predictive of your overall happiness. This has certainly always been the case for me. When I hold myself as a secret captive to the demands and wishes of others, when I masquerade as the person I am supposed to be while quietly dreaming of my truest self, I feel anxiety and depression. But when I speak my truth, even the act of speaking it aloud is cathartic, it lessens the forces pulling me apart.

How do we live in a world where we can be our truest selves? We have to create it. Every day, we are building tomorrow. Living our lives is a profound act of world building, and the world we create is made up of our actions and words. Here are the steps to building a tomorrow that is safe for everyone.

Step One: I speak my truth to you.

Speaking my truth brings opportunities to live my truth, because it has been heard in a safe community where everyone wants the best outcome for everyone else.

Step Two: You accept my truth.

You adjust your preconceptions about me.

Once steps one and two are complete, we have done something magical. We have created a place in the world by combining action and intention. In this place, you may feel confident that you can speak your own truth.

And that is Step Three.

We build a world with exposed, vulnerable people, who are held together with the mortar of acceptance and genuine care. We create a place of shelter where those who have been unable to speak their truth feel safe to add their voices. This is what church was always meant to be. This is what church is for.

Step Four is open doors.

What could be more Unitarian Universalist than this – the finding and speaking of personal truth and the creation of a world where this is possible? This is what I found when I washed up at the door of a UU church in Canada, having discovered that I could no longer with intellectual honesty hold to the tenets of my evangelical upbringing. I know I'm not the only one in this place with a similar story.

I grew up in hiding. I am determined to build a tomorrow where my own children will not have to do the same.

I would like to leave you with the words of my favorite Unitarian eccentric, Buckminster Fuller. “We are called to be architects of the future. Not it’s victims.”

Thank you.