

Gender, Sex and the Importance of Listening

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“It’s a girl!” In the past, these joyful words were offered to us as the initial information we heard about a child after she was born. Today in the US, we sometimes get this information before a baby enters the world at a gender reveal party via pink and blue cupcakes or balloons. In either case, the fact that one’s biological sex is the very first fact we know about another human being is an indication of what a fundamental aspect of one’s identity it is.

The words sex and gender are bandied about in casual conversation as if everyone completely understands their meaning. But we’re discovering today that the definition of these terms is more complex than previously thought. To be accurate, a gender reveal party would be renamed a biological sex reveal party. It doesn’t have the same engaging ring, though, does it?

Although the concepts are intimately related, gender is understood as a cultural concept while sex is biological. Gender can be defined as one’s innate sense of self. Having this bit of information, we quickly understand how there can be scholars whose life work it is to think seriously about their meaning.

How many genders are there? Is gender fixed or fluid? Is it possible that the sex listed on your birth certificate won’t match your gender identity? What is gender identity? Can gender and sex be the same thing? What is genderqueer or genderfluid? These questions are not easily answered and, as Catholic Christians, it’s important that we listen to what psychologists and social scientists are discovering about the answers to them.

More important still, as Daniel Walden states in his recent *Commonweal* article, [*Gender, Sex and Other Nonsense*](#), we must listen to one another’s life stories. This is of critical importance when a trans person chooses to reveal themselves to us by sharing their narrative. We live within history and know ourselves through the telling of our stories in real time. Each of us imposes meaning on our life by chronicling our experiences.

We first learn who we are from our parents, but ultimately, we discover God’s presence in our lives by telling our own story. Our parents are the first persons to know what our biological sex is, and it is they who guide us in learning what the implications of this fact are, and how our society interprets it. We quickly understand that the feedback our wider family and our peers give us is essential to our identity. But it is up to each of us to discern how to live this out in our lives. No one except we ourselves can tell us who we are.

In the March 9 issue of *Commonweal*, Paul Griffiths wrote a response to Walden, titled [*Gender & Identity*](#) stating that our gender performance - the idea that our gender is learned and performed based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity - is our gender. Underlying Griffiths’ thoughts seems to be an anxiety about locating authority within an individual.

There are also confusing allusions to philosophers, Latin quotes intended to defend traditional teaching, and an underlying reliance on the power he has as a white male cisgender (someone whose sex and gender identity are congruent) theologian.

When one is blessed to hear a trans person tell their story, I think the best response is to take off one's shoes and listen, just as Moses did when he encountered the burning bush, aware that one is on holy ground. Rigid boundaries and doctrine based on centuries old understanding of sex and gender are not the most helpful guides when trying to sort out queer theology.

In short, telling a trans person what only God can tell them does violence to their humanity. Insisting that trans persons "conduct themselves in accord with their God-given biological sex," as the Diocese of Lansing did in February 2021, and refusing to call them by the name they've chosen is claiming a power that is not the institution's but belongs to the individual.

Our mission as followers of Christ is to listen to one another's stories, respect everyone's experiences, and learn from the community about the beautiful variety in God's creation. In the words of Sr. Luisa Derouen, "It is impossible to extend respect and compassion for people while declaring at the same time that they do not exist." ([America Magazine 2021-02-25](#))

As I've begun to inform myself about transgender persons, getting to know them as individuals and listening to what they have to say, I've quickly realized that I don't know as much about gender, sex, and sexual orientation as I thought I did. I'm grateful for all I have been taught thus far and I look forward to continuing on the odyssey, expanding my horizons further.

The LGBT Initiative is developing a Trans 101 program to share information with anyone else who's interested in learning more on this topic, so stay tuned for details on when this project will be available. We'd be delighted if you joined us on our journey.