

Transgender Inclusion in Congregations

Transforming Hearts Collective

TRANSCRIPT: Session 4: Trans Experience and Spirituality

Hey everyone! We are going to get this next session started with an opening reading, which is actually a prayer from Rev. Theresa Soto that was crafted during the National Weekend of Prayer for Transgender Justice.

"Spirit of Life, in these difficult times, we ask for connection, to You, to ourselves, to one another, and to our greater purpose. We turn toward you, like a swift breeze, able to bring refreshment and life to our hearts that are burdened. We know that you know that transness is life and that You accept us and all the ways that we are, not as part of being human but as a multiplicity of expressions of love.

We call on you for strength, as the way before is long, and we have so far to travel. We travel toward Justice. Keep us focused on that. And to make that journey, we need safety and courage in equal measure. Give us both.

Soften the hearts of those who are causing their own suffering by clutching their transphobia so tightly. Show them the way back to their own humanity.

But above all, we ask for more love, around us, among us, between us. We give thanks and say amen."

Amen.

Thanks for lighting the chalice, Alex.
Thanks for that prayer.

So, welcome back everyone! We're so excited to be with you for the fourth session of Transgender Inclusion in Congregations.

Where we have been so far on this journey together is we have talked about Beloved Community and set a stage for being able to engage in this work of transformation together. We've talked about how gender oppression shows up in our spiritual communities and in our lives, and the impacts of patriarchy, and things of that nature. And last session, we talked about the gender binary and we explored a framework for understanding how trans people, in fact, exist despite cultural attitudes to the contrary.

So in this session, we're gonna talk about trans experience more specifically, and we're also gonna get into talking about trans spirituality, and the spiritual gifts of trans folk.

Last session, we talked about the gender binary in terms of how to think more expansively about gender diversity, and the fact that trans people exist. In this session, we're going to

talk a little bit more about what the actual experience is of living in ways that do not conform to that binary, and the real impacts of the gender binary, as well as spirituality. Some of those impacts are spiritual impacts.

So, that's where we're headed. Thank you for being here with us.
Yeah. Absolutely.

I am excited and happy to be here with Alex and with you. Really talking about the significance of holding the complexity of gender diversity as people of faith, and as faith communities, and also being able to hold the complexity of our spiritual lives our spiritual personhood as trans and gender non-conforming people.

So the first thing we want to do is offer a bit of an overview about trans experience more broadly. One of the things that has always been incredibly special for me, and I know for other folks within the community, is just to have an awareness of the richness of our lives and our communities.

Just as this is the case for any other grouping of folks, the trans experience-- there is no one trans experience. We are all sort of living really incredible lives, doing amazing things, sort of existing in different ways, in different spaces and places, and that is really a magnificent thing, a really beautiful thing.

And also a reminder that there's no way to know and understand the experience of every trans or gender non-conforming person, just because you happen to know one person. I think that's a really important thing to have an awareness of.

So, we're living really rich, incredible lives-- and people are living really full and beautiful and happy lives. and there are folks who are experiencing life in a way that is really hard and really stressful, right-- for all of the reasons that we're gonna talk about today.

Being trans -- which is something that I have found, folks often presume -- being trans does not automatically come with suffering, however, right-- culture creates that. We spent some time in the last session talking about the gender binary and why it exists, and what some of the impacts of that can be, and often are. But it is in fact the culture that creates that suffering.

There's a deep-- there's self-doubt and fear that often comes with constant rejection, both out in the world and interpersonally among folks that trans and gender non-conforming people are closer to.

And so, we're going to spend some time talking about all of that -- the impact of all that, and what that does to our spirits, and also what it means in terms of how we bounce back from that, what does resiliency look like.

So, who are trans people? Like Mykal said, there's an incredible diversity of experience and identity that exists within trans communities.

It's really exciting right now, that only a couple months ago, the second-ever national survey of trans people-- the results of that survey have been released and it's called the 2015 US Trans Survey. It actually surveyed 27,700 trans people, which is massive. It's the biggest survey that's probably ever been done representative of trans communities.

So now we have even bigger proof that trans people are all ages, all genders, all races, all geographies. We exist in every facet of life in this country regardless of stereotypes that might exist on the contrary.

One of the things that was really exciting for me to see in the survey is that 35% of people who took it, identify as non-binary, meaning we don't identify specifically as primarily women or primarily men, and that's huge.

I think there's a growing awareness that trans community is not just made up of people who, in the words of one person dear to me, "hop boxes." You know, from one box in the binary to the other box in the binary, that there's so much more to us and our communities. That certainly doesn't mean that there aren't people who do hop boxes-- that's a perfectly reasonable and valid way to be but it's not all of us.

Another really amazing thing from the survey was that the researchers found that more than 500 unique identity terms were provided in a write-in box about identity, in terms of gender identity.

- That's amazing.
- It's amazing!
- It's amazing.
- It's so amazing.

I was doing a workshop last weekend in which people were like, "Why are there so many words? Why are there so many pronouns?" "Why can't there be just like one or two, or whatever?" And it's because, this is what I kept telling them, I said, it's because as trans people, we have had to literally force language to make space for us, because the larger world has not usually-- dominant culture has not generally acknowledged that we exist.

So when you have to force language to make space for yourself, you're going to make up language that works to describe you and that language is going to be different for each of us because our identities are unique. There aren't actually just two or five or seven, or fifteen gender identities in the world. There's actually a huge diversity of gender identities once you get outside of that binary.

So, it's no surprise that there's 500 unique identity terms. Personally, I find that beautiful. I know some people find that overwhelming, but it's beautiful.

So, that's sort of a little bit about the sheer magnitude of the diversity that exists within and among trans people. And also, that the survey helped further illuminate and support the

findings of the previous largest survey that had every been done which was the 2011 National Trans Discrimination Survey, and one of the things that really came out and was just so striking from that original survey, was when you put numbers to the discrimination that has been faced by trans communities, how heavy that is and how heavy that gets.

Some of the biggest struggles that we face as a community have to do with economic justice, specifically around employment and the difficulty of finding employment, policing and incarceration, and being disproportionately policed and incarcerated as a community, health care access, specifically because being trans often comes with unique health care needs, so getting access to health care is a really big deal for us and it's really hard for a lot of us, and documentation.

Again, as trans people, documentation is a big deal for us because we so often hold identities that don't match the legal documentation that we have been given by the state, if we have any. And even and especially outside of the systems that exist, that aren't even ways to document who we are--

- Exactly.
- in any official kind of capacity.

Right. Things that the survey lifted up had to do with things like the fact that almost a third of trans people live in poverty, which is hugely more than the general population. The unemployment rate among trans people is three times the rate within the general population. Trans communities have a long history of being policed, specifically because of our gender non-conformity. So, it's not just that we get incarcerated and get policed at higher rates, in general, it's actually because of the fact that we're trans that this happens.

At a certain point in time, I think it was in the first decade of 2000s, there was some research that came out from California that said that the majority of hate crimes committed in that state against trans people, were committed by the police.

That's the kind of reality that exists for us and it's no surprise that the majority of trans people, according to the survey, don't feel that they can trust police. We don't actually feel like we can depend on the systems of what we often call the "injustice system" to actually help us survive. Too often, that has been a system that has been an oppressive system not a system that helps us survive.

89% of trans people don't have their true name and gender on all of their IDs. So, only 11% of us actually have documentation that matches across the board, which is huge. The impacts that that has on people's lives are huge.

And one of the things that I think is one of the most striking stats that has come out of both of these surveys, has been the fact that among trans people, 40% of us have attempted suicide at some point in our lives, and a lot of us has attempted suicide multiple times.

This most recent survey found that 73% of those who have attempted suicide did so when they were 17 or younger. So, it's our kids and our youth who are actively trying to commit suicide and often are succeeding.

One of the things that I often remind people when we look at these stats from these surveys is that we aren't able to measure how many people succeeded. So we don't know how many people have attempted and succeeded at taking their own lives within the trans community. But we know that 40% have tried and are still here.

And a more recent stat from this most recent survey that wasn't measured in the last one was that 82% of trans people have had serious thoughts of killing themselves at some point in their life, which again is just staggering.

I had to sit and breathe for a minute after reading that this most recent-- when I was going through this most recent report.

And finally, just to keep things heavy for a minute because this is what's real, the original survey in 2011 found that 63% of respondents had experienced a serious act of discrimination at some point in their lives, and the researchers defined a "serious act of discrimination" as something that would have a major impact on a person's quality of life or ability to sustain themselves financially or emotionally.

So, 63% of trans people have had that happen, and 23%, almost a quarter of trans people have experienced a catastrophic level of discrimination, meaning three or more such major life-disrupting events due to bias. That's sort of the reality.

We often talk about -- when we do Trans 101 type workshops and stuff like that, we sort of try to struggle with just the concept that yes, trans people exist and here's the ways in which we exist, and sometimes we don't really get to dig that deeply into, "Okay, so then what? What are the impacts of existing in opposition to the gender binary in one or more ways?"

One thing that I think is also important to raise if we're talking about a sort of general experience, and this notion that if you have met or talked to one trans person, it's impossible to know everyone else because our experiences are so markedly different.

I had a -- just as an anecdote -- had a really interesting conversation with someone right before the Weekend of Prayer about the fact that that weekend was happening and why, and the person said to me, "Well, you look like you're living a perfectly great life. And so what do we need to do this for?" Why do we have to do this given that it seems clear that trans people are living really wonderful lives and all that. And I said, "You know, I'm living the life that I am living and there are things about it that are marvelous, and there are things about it that are a struggle." And there are trans women of color who are living on the street, like within an hour of where I live. And I know that that's true because I know some of those folks and all of the folks that those folks are connected to.

And so the fact that not all of us can exist in a way that feels good and in a way that isn't harmful, the fact that all of us can't exist in that way, means that we all have work to do. And so it's just this notion that it's important to be mindful. These numbers are not just numbers. They're a reflection of reality. They're a reflection of what our communities have to manage and deal with on a regular basis and it's important that we're aware of that and that we're prepared to do things differently to account for that.

- Seemed like a good place for that.
- Absolutely.

And I think that takes us really seamlessly into the next thing we wanted to talk about, which is how intersections exist in our lives, and the impact of multiple oppressions within trans people's lives.

Because often, the folks who get lifted up in mainstream media tend to be folks who are white and/or have financial privileges, and/or... There have been a lot of cases when people are like, "The first trans man to ever become pregnant," and you're like "No, nu-uh, honey." (laughing) Trans people have been-- have been getting pregnant for a long time. But that's what mainstream media does, it takes the most palatable person or the most mainstream-acceptable expression of trans identity and then lifts that up as if that's the only expression that exists.

So even when really fierce, awesome folks like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, who are trans women of color, get lifted up, they themselves will say, "And I embody a certain kind of femininity that is very palatable to the mainstream. And I want to be really clear that I'm not the only representation of trans womanhood, right?"

So there's a lot of ways in which that happens. So, when it comes to these experiences of being trans and the impact of existing an opposition to the binary in the world, as you layer on different levels of oppression, it adds all sorts of impact and risk to that experience.

What I often talk about when I talk about how intersecting oppressions work is that we sort of are taught by mainstream culture that identity is sort of like this plus this plus this. So you've got like race and sexuality, and age and class and ability and gender and geography. And so we sort of take all these different things and they exist very separately. And then, if you're marginalized in multiple ways, it's just like race plus class, plus gender but that's not how it works at all.

And actually, Andrea Smith, who's this really fierce academic around anti-racism work and anti-colonialism work, has talked about how it's actually more like a venn diagram. Instead of individual circles, it's this venn diagram effect of all these different circles intersecting with each other. And when you exist at the intersections of those overlapping experiences of marginalization, it's a compounding effect.

So it's not 1 + 1, it's more like 10 x 10. The experiences of being undocumented and trans, and queer, and young, suddenly, it's not just the effects of being undocumented plus the effects of being trans. It's "this times this." It's a compounded effect.

And just as having multiple oppressions can lead to a compounded effect of oppression, having multiple privileges does the same thing. I can say that personally as a person who yeah, I'm trans, I'm queer, and that's been really hard in my life, But I'm also white. My parents were middle class. I had access to higher education.

So when you start adding up the ways in which I've had protective factors, and sometimes we talk about privilege and it makes it sound like I've been given this gift But really what it is is, there's a whole lot of shit I haven't had to deal with because I'm white, I was raised middle class, I had access to higher education, I'm temporarily able-bodied, these sorts of things. So, for every piece that I've been marginalized it's been offset a bit by the fact that I have these other privileges that have protected me a certain amount.

And I think one way to sort of illuminate this with actual lives is to look at the way in which HIV shows up in trans communities. This is another thing from the 2015 US Trans Survey that really struck me because it shows that compounding effect of oppression.

So the general population has HIV at a rate of 0.3%. 0.3% of the general population of the country is HIV positive. In the trans population, it's 1.4%. 1.4% of the trans population is HIV positive. That's 4.6 times the rate of the general population. Then, within trans women, 3.4% of trans women are HIV positive. That's 11 times the rate of the general population. Black trans women - 19% of Black trans women are HIV positive, which is 63 times the rate of the general population.

So you can see how, if it was just a matter of 1 + 1 + 1, being trans, being a woman, being Black, you wouldn't see that kind of number. It would just be slightly higher. It would be 3%, or 6%, or something like that. But instead, it's this "10 x 10," exponential sort of compounding effect, where adding being trans on makes it 4.6 times, and then adding being a woman on, 11 times, adding being Black on, 63 times.

So, again, this is just an example of how this shows up in real people's lives. Another really similar example is around hate violence. I already talked about the fact that a lot of the hate violence get perpetuated by the very entities that are designed and mandated with protecting the public and instead they're promoting hate crimes.

But another thing that is really striking about hate violence in terms of trans populations is that consistently of the reported LGBT hate crime homicide victims-- so specifically, we're looking at murders here-- 70 to 80% of all LGBT hate crime homicide victims are trans women of color, 70 to 80%.

It's just heavy. It's just really heavy. And at some point I think someone was talking about life expectancy and how among trans women of color, the life expectancy is something like 35, 38 years old because of stats like this. So, it's really important to keep in mind the ways

in which race and class specifically, but also documentation, ability, age, so many different aspects of who we are impact our ability to survive and thrive in this world as trans people, and not paint our community with a single brush because it does a disservice to those who are struggling the most under this weight of oppression.

Right. That's right.

What would you add, Mykal?

Uh, it's really heavy.

I'm sorry for laying the heaviness on.

Yeah. It's really heavy and it's really, really real. I think it's important as we're talking about our experiences, these experiences that our folks are going through, is that we're real about that. The realness of it I think can and should have an impact on how we approach, and what we do and how we engage both within the context of spiritual community and also as people of faith outside.

So yeah, it's heavy and it's real, and folks, we all need to be really clear about what's real and what's not. So, thank you for that.

I was reminded as you were talking, Alex, about a conversation I had with one of my comrades here in North Carolina, in the wake of, as some of you may know, HB2 was "supposedly" repealed last week by a new law, HB142, which actually isn't a repeal at all. It really just doubles down on discrimination. It's worded slightly differently but has ultimately the same effects as the other law. And I was talking to a dear friend of mine about the heaviness of that and about the impact that that is gonna continue to have on the hearts and minds and spirits of trans people and [unclear] and she said to me, "You know, it is a damn good thing that I have spirit. Because if I didn't, I don't know where I'd be, and I don't know who I could rely on and trust at this moment."

And it stuck with me. I have forgotten about it 'til you were lifting up all of that information, Alex. It segues us into talking about spirituality. I think what she said to me is absolutely true and right for so many of us. I think many of us-- those of us who are still here-- are still here precisely because of spirit and spirituality.

I recognize too that depending on who you talk to, folks may have a different connection to or actually a disconnection from the words spirit and spirituality, right, I want to be honest about that, be real about that. But, you know, more broadly, there are a number of ways to think about spirit and spirituality-- that it's really a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves and typically involves some sort of search for meaning.

And I think that is exactly who trans folks are in our lives; just having this deep connection to what it is at the core of who we are and having a deep understanding and recognition of who we are meant to be in the world and being that. It also involves a deep connection to community; the people and places and things that help give life -- that help give us life.

There's a really meaningful statistic in the 2015 survey that Alex mentioned earlier, that 63% of trans people actually identify as religious or spiritual. 63%. That is a massive number to me. Folks are deeply connected to spirit.

And so I think it's really important to acknowledge and understand the fact that trans people are people of deep spirit and spirituality.

One of my favorite books that I have gone back to over the years is called *Transgender Journeys*, and was written by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan. And they talk in that book about the spiritual discipline of mapping our pathway, like doing what we need to do in order to be who we need to be and are even called to be.

One of the things that I always talk about when folks are asking me to say more about my journey as a trans person-- there's this presumption that there are these specific things that you do to be a trans person. (laughing) So we start going down these lists of things that I'm supposed to be doing to be a trans person, and I say to them, "I was called to be this person." Who I am right now is who I am called to be. I don't even know how or when that happened and I can't explain that, but I know that that is true.

And so I move toward that call every day in all the ways that I can and I think every person does that-- Every trans person does that, moves toward that call in all the ways that they can, recognizing that what that looks like and means is gonna be different for everyone. But this sort of mapping our pathway involves not only how we understand ourselves, but also being surrounded by people who get us and who are gonna help us be accountable to be the people we are called to be in the world

It's what helps us honor and lift up our core experiences as trans and non-binary folks, and what keeps us connected to all of that. And all of that is uniquely different for each of us.

As Alex pointed out, there is massive diversity in general of trans folk, and there's a massive diversity of spiritual experience within trans communities. One thing that I draw a lot of strength from is the knowledge that trans people have been spiritual leaders in countless religious traditions over the course of centuries. Our current understanding of what "trans" means in this particular dominant Western culture of the United States is very new.

It's this very new conception of what trans means, who trans people are, etc. etc. But transness is not new at all and gender diversity has existed in every civilization over the course of the entirety of human existence as far as anybody knows. And in fact -- great lengths have been gone to to try to eradicate gender diversity from humanity and civilizations.

But beyond the fact the we have existed for a very long time, we have existed specifically as spiritual people and spiritual leaders for a very long time. And there's a couple of different resources that we're going to include in the resource list for this session that's gonna illuminate that a little bit more, but one wonderful reflection that I've run across from Pauline Park who's a fabulous Korean American trans activist and advocate, is that Pauline

Park has said that many historic shamanic traditions particularly in Asian countries held the idea that combining the characteristics of both sexes or both genders could connect a person to a transcended spiritual realm.

So this idea that in many different religious traditions, particularly prior to the advent of Christianity as a dominant force in the world, the idea that having multiple spirits, multiple gendered spirits in one body or embodying characteristics of both genders or many genders, multiple genders-- because even the concept of their being two was a concept that was constructed at a certain point in time.

But this sense of being multiple and more than, was a spiritual thing, was a way that connected a person to something greater than themselves in a very specific way, which is fabulous. And it is not history that most of us have any access to or are taught in any way.

And that is also not to say that trans people and gender diversity doesn't play a role within Christianity as well because it does. There's a lot of really wonderful scholarship that has been done on the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, in terms of how gender diversity shows up and what we would consider today to be trans identity has showed up in those religious texts as well.

So, this idea that trans people sort of just came out of nowhere (laughing) within the last hundred years is a complete falsehood and absolutely not true. And there's been some really rich... just rich, rich conversation about how-- the ways in which even Jesus was gender non-conforming.

- Yes.

- Right? Folks don't think about it on that level. But if you really look at the text and the way it was written and just have some sense of how Jesus carried himself and the clothes that Jesus wore, and the ways that Jesus showed up, if you think about culturally, how men and women showed up in spaces in those times, it gets really clear how gender non-conforming Jesus really was. But you know, folks struggle (laughing) with that reality though. It's clear and it's there. It's just a matter of being open to receive it, so thank you for offering all that.

Yeah, absolutely. And since we're on the subject of history and religious history with respect to trans and gender non-conforming and non-binary folks, we wanted to take just a little minute to talk specifically about Unitarian Universalism and the history of trans folk within Unitarian Universalism. If you're not UU, take this as an invitation to do some digging into your own tradition if that tradition is something other than Unitarian Universalism

But as a religion, Unitarian Universalism has been at the forefront of gay and lesbian inclusion, particularly, for decades. We have an identity as a faith of being LGBTQ welcoming. The experience of being trans in our congregations is sort of similar to the experience of being out and gay in the '80s and early '90s. Like we're really several decades behind when it comes to the experiences of trans folk compared to the experiences of gay

and lesbian people, specifically, and to a lesser extent bisexual and queer folks, which is a whole 'nother conversation.

But there's discrimination. There's a lack of access. There's a lot of benign neglect and just basic lack of understanding. This isn't true for all UU congregations and UU spaces, but it's true enough that it shows that there's a real need for intentional work on this issue.

Although our first openly trans ministers were ordained in the late '80s, which is amazing, in comparison with other denominations, it wasn't until 2002 that the first openly trans minister was actually called to serve a congregation. And something like only five or so openly trans ministers have ever reached final fellowship within ministry, which is--

- which is just staggering.

- a long process between ordination and sort of like final professorship in academic settings.

A similar small number of trans ministers have ever been called to serve a church for any extended period of time; a very, very small number of people. And quite a few of our trans ministers have left the ministry and have even left the faith entirely because of the barriers that they've encountered.

The national office of the Unitarian Universalist Association added trans issues specifically to its work around sexuality and gender in 1996. So it took a couple decades to actually include trans identity in that work explicitly. And it wasn't until 1999 that trans identity was explicitly included in the Welcoming Congregation Program, which is the program that congregations could go through to more actively include LGBTQ people.

And the last factoid I'll share is that wasn't until 2007, ten years ago, that our General Assembly passed a resolution explicitly affirming trans identity. So when you sort of compare these sorts of milestones to similar milestones for lesbian and gay folks, or same-sex couples and that sort of thing, you can see that we're several decades behind when it comes to awareness, intentional work, and the real lived experiences of trans people in congregations, unfortunately, in Unitarian Universalism. So there's a long way to go.

Right, there really, really is.

It is telling. It's really, really intense and deep connection between the fact that the first openly trans minister was not called to serve a congregation until 2002, recognizing that trans identity and welcome wasn't explicitly a part of the UUA programming until 1999. So, all of that makes some sense, right, to have trans folks ordained as of the late '80s, without any explicit understanding of what welcoming folks who are trans is supposed to look like in congregations until 1999, more than ten years later. The story tells itself, right?

And there are still congregations who went through the welcoming programming around LGBTQ issues back in the '90s who haven't done it since.

That's right.

And so, there are folks who have that lovely "we're a Welcoming Congregation" sign up in the congregation but that work didn't ultimately initially include trans identity or experience, and so it's important to have that awareness too that there's still work to do. There's still deep, deep work to be done. And so-- which is why we're just grateful that we get to be here and that you get to be where you are doing this work with us.

Just continuing to think a little bit about spiritual gifts, there's often this narrative that gets told that we aren't spiritual beings. But that is really clearly not the case, that we are deeply connected not only to what is at our core, but also deeply connected to our wider community, to those sort of forces out in the world that give life and joy, and that help us, and empower us to really exist in ways that feel good and true, and right, that help us sort of move toward that call that I was talking about.

Trans folk aren't necessarily seeking when it comes to spirituality and religion. We're bringing spiritual gifts. And like Mykal was just saying, for a lot of us, we have a very clear and compelling connection to that which is greater than ourselves that has literally kept us here-- that has kept us alive. And because we go through such a profound level of discernment and deep internal journeying to really claim our authentic selves, in terms of gender, that often involves a spiritual journey as well.

So, the level of clarity and claiming of that which is true that trans folks bring, is really high. But what often happens when we have conversations about inclusion of trans people in communities of faith is that an assumption gets made that trans people who come to communities of faith are down-trodden, and seeking, and spiritually confused or looking for spiritual community to fill a hole in their lives or something like that. And that's often not the case.

And so, we lose out on a lot of spiritual gifts of trans people when we make that assumption and/or when we further the bias and discrimination against trans people in our communities of faith that exists in our larger world.

Another deeply spiritual gift that I know I and so many others reply on is our connection to our ancestors. The richness of the hard and beautiful lived experiences of trans and gender non-conforming people who came before us. Folks like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, and Les Feinberg, and others. If you don't know who those people are, look up those people. There are some remarkable folks who paved the way, who made it possible. And some of those folks are in our faith right now. Let's just be really, really real about that.

And that is a part of that, sort of connection to that which is beyond ourselves. Those folks left energy, left resiliency, left joy, left real intense ways on how to just live and be in the world, that folks are relying on even now. That is a spiritual gift and one that we carry and keep close to our hearts.

Finally, I just think it's worth saying that there's so much more to us, so many more gifts to bring to bear that is beyond pronouns and body parts. Often when folks are talking about the lived experiences of trans people, folks are talking about "issues" rather than relationships and lived experiences. When people focus exclusively on those things, on things like pronouns and bathrooms-- not that those things aren't important -- they are. They are deeply, deeply important. But when there's an exclusive focus on those things, there's no opportunity really for relationship building or to bring those deeper gifts forward and to honor them and to understand them.

Because ultimately, we're not talking about issues, we're talking about people.
Right.

And we're talking about all of the stuff that we bring, all the gifts that we bring, all the stuff that we carry, all the ways in which we're invested in being in relationship, with being in community, and all of the ways that relationships and communities have done harm and how do we hold all of that together. It's deep work and it's meaningful work and it's necessary work.

One of things that give me life and lifts me up is how diverse the spiritual experiences are among trans people because like we were talking about earlier, we often have to forge our own path and answer a spiritual call that calls us in a way that goes outside of the boundaries of expectations and normative ways of moving through the world. And that's often true for spirituality too.

It's so inspiring how much diversity there is when it comes to spiritual belief and spiritual practice within trans communities. That we exist-- I know folks who are trans who exist in every single organized religion and outside of organized religion as well. So, there's folks who have individual spiritual practice and there are folks who have denominational or organized religious spiritual practice, there's folks who combine them, and it's just amazing.

I think I might have, earlier in life, made an assumption that of course, there's not any Orthodox Jew trans folk and of course there aren't any Catholic trans folk.

- But no, of course there are.
- Yes.

Because we exist in every single spiritual context and we make meaning within those spiritual contexts and we're really clear on what our faith is, regardless of what the authorities within a particular religious tradition might say about us or about what their interpretation of the Divine says about us.

- That's right.

And that constantly, every day, brings me hope and joy and lifts me up to know that there are so many different ways of making meaning in this world. And frankly, I think as a

Unitarian Universalist, as someone who was raised Unitarian Universalist, it feels like a very authentically UU way of approaching spirituality as well. Because as a Unitarian Universalist, one of the core principles of my faith is that there are so many different ways to understand truth.

There are so many different truths, and that all of these different truths are true, that there is not one, single way to understand that which is larger than ourselves, or that which connects us all to each other. And there's not one single way to understand gender either, and the truths that each person holds about gender, and about how gender connects them to spirit.

Thank you for saying that.

Whew! So this session was a little heavier than some of our past sessions. Thank you for sticking with us as we sort of held some of that heaviness together. From here, we're going to be talking more about culture and about how to shift culture, especially in faith communities, where the hurdles are, where the barriers are, and how to really create more space and think differently about how to create environments and cultures that are trans affirming rather than just specific changes that can be made like adding bathrooms, or whatever.

How to shift culture and why it's important to shift culture is really what we're going to be talking about next.

That's right.

And just related to that, it's so important to acknowledge-- and we're gonna really delve into this next time-- acknowledge the fact that that work, that it's really deep work and that it is work that is internal as well as external.

- Right?

- Yes.

Surely there are things that can happen in the wider context of the space of the community of faith, there are certain things that can happen in terms of policy and all of that, signage and those kinds of things. And, what feels actually more important for me is that there's deep, internal work that can happen around how folks understand culture, understand the ways in which gender impacts culture, and deep work around the ways in which we show up in that, and what we can do for ourselves to help change that.

And so I'm excited to dig into that with folks next time.

Well with that, we've love to send you on your way with some closing words from Q Wideman, who is a queer black Muslim, based out of Durham, North Carolina, and Q wrote this Muslim prayer for the National Weekend of Prayer for Transgender Justice mentioned earlier.

“In the name of Allah, the Lover, the Gentle, the Kind, grant us in our souls a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church, where we may kneel before an altar where no walls and no names exist. Unite our hearts together and guide us out of darkness into freedom and light. Grant us the power of our ancestors who protected one another from oppression, and who helped one another to stand in your light. Anoint us with patience, strengthen our footsteps and grant us victory over those who reject us. Break our kindred in prisons free of their shackles and reunite our families. Cleanse and heal the souls of our fallen trans kindred with water, ice and snow; and expand their entry into your Garden. Open a path for us to freedom that leaves no one behind.”

Ashe.

Thank you for extinguishing the chalice, Alex and thank you all for being in this moment with us. We are excited to have you back with us again.

Thanks, friends.
Take care.