

November 26, 2017

“Say Their Names”

The Rev. Heather Janules

“If they ask me ‘what is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

As the ancient story tells us, Moses poses this question to the bush that burns but is not consumed, this miracle a sign that Moses stands, barefoot, in the presence of the holy. That Moses is speaking to God. He then hears God’s enigmatic reply: “I am who I am.”

“I am who I am.” This reply reflects the nature of the sacred - too complex, too mysterious to be reduced to a mortal name. This passage from Exodus suggests that the reality of God’s glorious being is ineffable, failed by language and the limited human imagination.

Unlike the sacred presence revealed through the burning bush, we all have names. Some names change throughout the arc of our lives as we begin – or end – families of our own or if we simply choose another name we prefer. If we are fortunate, the name people know us by and our essential essence – our unique being– are in harmony with one another.

One of the many reasons I am a Unitarian Universalist is the way we welcome children into the world, through the ceremony of child Dedication. The practice began with the Universalists, with parents publicly introducing their child by name and dedicating their new baby to God. In time, the tradition shifted, with the family and community instead dedicating *themselves* to nurturing this new life so it may grow as it is meant to be, not how we want this child to become. As Kahlil Gibran affirms in a reading often used in Dedication ceremonies, through this rite-of-passage we are reminded that:

[Our] children are not [our] children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through [us] but not from [us],
And though they are with [us] yet they belong not to [us].¹

Through this rite-of-passage, we affirm that no matter what name we give this child, the reality of their being, in all their complexity and beauty, transcends our hopes and dreams for them and their future. Simply, “they are who they are.”

¹ <http://www.katsandogz.com/onchildren.html>

Those who know and love people who come out as transgender are often reminded of this truth. When someone takes steps – sometimes difficult, legally complex and painful steps – to inhabit a body and a legal identity that reflect a gender different than how they were identified at birth, they publicly claim part of their essential essence. One could say that this transition is something like a second birth.

I once had the honor of co-officiating a renaming ceremony for a transgender woman, a ceremony so much like the Dedications I have come to cherish.

The service began with the woman, who we will call Anne Murphy, entering the chapel, along with men from her circle of loved ones, and kindling the chalice with a lit candle they carried together. The men each offered words of support and care. After a friend read a poem Anne wrote, “Daniel and the Girl With No Name” and Anne removed the tie she wore around her neck we – all together – ceremonially welcomed Anne. I affirmed:

We stand in the presence of one another, in the presence of the sacred, known to us by many names...We are unified in honoring a difficult journey and mourning losses along the way. Every journey ends when the traveler comes home. And today we celebrate a homecoming.

You were born Matthew Daniel Murphy. But you were born to see the world differently, to move in ways that others of us will not, and to embark on a journey that few will ever take. No one’s life stands still where it begins. Yours moves in special ways.

After the community named, in unison, her new name – “You are Anne Elizabeth Murphy” – the women of the gathered community offered their welcome and handed her a new symbol, a sign of her femininity and her belonging to the world of women, a floral scarf.

I tell this story now as this is the time of year when people gather to say together the names of transgender people in community. But the names are not said as a gesture of welcome but in mourning, as part of Transgender Day of Remembrance services. Held on or around November 20th, these gatherings are a public recognition of transgender lives lost to violence and an affirmation of the identities of these victims as some media accounts – adding insult to injury – use names given at birth in their reporting.

Here in the United States, 2017 has seen the highest number of recorded homicides of transgender people with twenty-six deaths. And, in this time when there is much cultural conversation about “intersectionality,” the ways in which we travel through the world with privileges and vulnerabilities based on the collective identities we bear, it is again clear that those brave enough to inhabit the space where transgender and female and brown skin come together are most at risk.

Part of living a spiritual life is dwelling in “the world as it is” and envisioning “the world as it should be.” My vision, my prayer, is that the Transgender Day of Remembrance tradition becomes obsolete as no one is again targeted for violence for embodying their essential essence. For being who they are.

But as the international list of those murdered and remembered in 2017, with their name, location, manner and date of death, is 36 pages long, I know we are far away from this vision becoming a reality.

As this is the last Sunday in November, we will soon shift from dwelling on “abundance” to focusing on “hope.” I share one more story as it gives me hope for the human capability to, as is often pledged in a Dedication, love and nurture another for the person they truly are.

When I was a teenager, my friend Jenn introduced me to one of her friends, who we will call Karen. Karen lived in walking distance to the campground where I worked each summer. Far from home and my friends there, it was wonderful having a like-minded companion so close. Karen and I also became good friends.

Karen was the youngest of three girls born to Catholic parents, a “change of life” baby. So, considering their generation and faith background, it was with trepidation that Karen came out to her parents as lesbian. A close-knit family, they accepted her sexual orientation.

But, in time, Karen realized that there was more to her gender story. I remember receiving the email Karen sent to her friends, simply stating that she could not imagine a future for herself, living as a woman. Karen had taken the steps to plan a transition to live as a man, with surgery scheduled for the near future.

Like the rest of Karen’s friends, I replied that nothing had changed between us and she had my support. But she would soon go by “he.” “If they ask me ‘what is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Later, he recalled coming out to his parents as transgender, telling them about the upcoming surgery and talking about the need for a new name, feeling the same uncertainty as when he came out before. In that conversation, his father paused and said, “I have always wanted a son. So, you should have my name.” The person I first met as Karen now goes by a new middle name - Josh – but legally bears his father’s name, David.

In commentary about the Exodus story of the burning bush, part of the Roman Catholic catechism affirms that “A name expresses one's essential identity and the meaning of one's life...To disclose one's name is to make oneself known to others; in a way it is to hand oneself over by becoming accessible, capable of being known more intimately and addressed personally.” By inviting Karen to become David, his father both claims his child as his own and affirms his essential essence. He is what he is...and he is beloved.

This kind of love is what transgender people need...as, I believe, this is the kind of love all of us need as we are all a unique expression of "life longing for itself."

"A World For Which There is Not Yet a Name"

Sam R. F. Wilson

As Rev. Heather stated moments ago, part of our task as people on a spiritual journey is to dwell in the "world as it is" while simultaneously envisioning the "world as it should be." She spoke of the importance of names, and the powerful effect of language. Language matters. But language also has limitations. When we talk about remembering and honoring the lives of transgender folx in the US who have been murdered in the past year, we must also recognize the resilience of those who, historically, have named themselves with the limited tools at their disposal, who have inhabited a world beyond this one, fighting for trans-liberation before trans-liberation was a term. What do we call a world for which there is not yet a name, and how can we nonetheless work toward it?

Sylvia Rivera, a transgender activist and self-identified drag queen, was born in 1951 in New York City. Sylvia had Venezuelan and Puerto Rican-decent, and growing up she identified as Boricua. Boricua comes from the Arawak word, Boringuen, which was the name ascribed to Puerto Rico before it was colonized. It is commonly used in Spanish to refer to people with Puerto Rican heritage.

Marsha P. Johnson, a gay liberation activist and self-identified drag queen, was born in 1945 in New Jersey. Johnson was "black," a term with origins in the European caste system, related to the Arabic word "nadir," signifying the counterpart, or, the most depraved. Black is commonly used in the English language to refer to people with heritage from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Together, Rivera and Johnson, self-ascribed black and Boricua transvestites, founded the "Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries," or, STAR, in 1970, as an organization to advocate for homeless drag queens and gay runaways. When they had the funds, they created STAR House, a shelter for this population. These two women would prostitute themselves in order to feed and shelter their "kids," the youth in these shelters, and prevent these "kids" from having to do the same.

They took on the word transvestite before it was considered offensive; before someone in a suit with a higher education decided to coin the term transgender. While the world waited for this political-correction, they were out all night on the streets, waiting for no one to create a word that might enable them to know what they needed to do and how to do it. They owned the words black, Boricua, and transvestite despite the fact that these had been words that had

been used throughout their lives to bring them down. They worshiped the word transvestite in spite of its profanity, for they knew of and had faith in its holiness, by that name or any other.

As Benji Hart, a black, queer, femme, artist and educator writes:

To get up, to dress oneself, walk outside, all without needing a name
for any of it; To be subversion's mascot long before being its lover;

To inhabit futures in a bedroom of ghosts; To acknowledge language
as another "border." What is the word for "belonging to the land?"

What is the word for "ancestor moving in my throat?" (To know
what one is celebrating one must also know what one is mourning.)

The sign for "everything not yet imagined?" Back teeth biting
down on a tongue before it formed the phrase. (I share this with you

because you are even now a part of it.) Lips curled into the sound for
"world after this one." What letter can stand in for a jail cell left open,

empty and ringing as a speechless mouth?

Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were subversion's mascots long before becoming its lovers. They were revolutionaries simply for being themselves; they did not need a name for themselves or for the world that they worked toward. Trans-liberation and the creation of a beloved community are the work of inhabiting a world beyond this one, a world for which there is not yet a name.

Who then, are we, to work toward this unnamed world? We too do not need a name to know whom we are: we are a people at a crossroads in history. In 2017, we are a people living in a world where New York City now has 31 different legal definitions for one's gender, and businesses can be fined up to 6 figures for misusing that gender. We are a people living near Boston, a city with a public library that now has a program where drag queens with glitter beards read children's books to kindergarteners every Saturday. We are a people living in a country that elected Danica Roem, its first openly transgender person elected to and seated in a US State Legislature.

But here, now, in 2017, we are also a people living in a world where transgender folx are still routinely discriminated against, harassed, and murdered simply for being themselves. A year with the highest recorded number of transgender homicides, which says nothing of the

numerous folk who were hospitalized for near-death injuries or those who harmed or killed themselves after deciding they just could not bear it any more.

Where then, do we, as Unitarian Universalists, turn at this cross road?

UU Minister Sean Dennison has an idea for our place in this unnamed world: "I imagine a church where every sweaty, glitter-drenched, dancing body is welcome. That can be loud and bold and angry when necessary. Where we notice the many who say 'No one sees me' and take the time to stop, look them in the eye, and say 'We see you.' Where everyone is invited to not only attend the show, but to be part of it – to engage soul-deep in the art of living an authentic, embodied, meaningful life."

Today we mournfully remember the lives of those who were all-too-often not seen by anyone. We pledge to notice those unseen amongst us, to see them, and to invite them to join us on our journeys toward meaning. We also honor the resilience and strength of subversion's former mascots and lovers, and we look toward them for guidance and inspiration. We lift up in gratitude all those, named and unnamed, who have gotten us this far.

But let me be clear: we must also do more than list names, say the right names, use the right pronouns, and know the right language to describe exactly what we are seeking. We must not be faltered by the limitations of language. Together, let us collectively curl our lips into the sound of the world beyond this one; let us not hesitate to move loudly, boldly and angrily toward a world that we are on the precipice of: a world for which there is not yet a name.