

Man in the Fitting Room

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“Will the man in the fitting room please leave?”

Dread filled me, as I stood uneasily in my booth. I was out shopping that night with my friend Elizabeth: she for a work event, and I for a friend's wedding, and we were each in our own process of trying on, and then those words were called out, with a tense silence afterwards. Maybe it was my voice; maybe when I tossed a skirt over the divider for her to try, maybe I spoke loudly, deeply. Maybe it was my appearance, perhaps I walked in ahead of someone who scrutinized my ‘taller, wider, straighter’ figure. I'll never know.

Fortunately, this happened to me recently, and I have a greater confidence than a few years ago. I did not flee from the store upset, though I was uncomfortable. I continued to shop, and made a purchase. I also spoke with a store associate, the same one who made that announcement, and we had a respectful chat about the balance a store navigates, when it hears the concerns of one customer, yet aims to respect rights of all customers.

And I do have rights, as a lawfully behaving person in the Commonwealth. Since October 2016, the Massachusetts general laws concerning public spaces and public services, these were amended to include gender identity as a prohibited basis of discrimination.

At the heart of this law is the definition, "Gender identity shall mean a person's gender-related identity, appearance or behavior, whether or not that gender-related identity, appearance or behavior is different from that traditionally associated with a person's physiology or assigned sex at birth."

That is a mouthful. Let me refer you to the handout I've offered today. The Gender Bread Person was created by Sam Killermann as an illustration of the multiple identity spectrums a person exists on. Everyone gets fixated on sex - on physical body characteristics - but we all have other facets of identity, such as outward presentation, inward identification, and also our matters of attraction orientations. Every category is divided in a 'YES AND' fashion - as opposed to the 'either/or' binary.

Okay, back to the law: it goes on to require that gender identity be "sincerely held as part of a person's core identity". This reads less awkwardly, but it is hardly poetry. But the words 'sincerely' and 'core identity' stand out for me. The lawmakers rely on individuals to declare their truths, to in earnest come out, and in recognition of that sincerity, gain legal status under the law.

That makes me think of some actual poetry, a line from Robert Frost's "Mowing" which reads: "Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak". Our truth has great power. But it isn't the sort of truth we'd perhaps like it to be, the tangible kind that scientists experiment and collect data on.

Of course, not all truths are verifiable - some may be as fleeting and diverse as individual moments. We visit an art museum together, and we both experience a form of truth; our reactions to the pieces. These are personal, may change over time, and never require evidence. It is as they say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder".

The scientists, the art-goers, all have an "Owner's Stake" in these matters, their first-hand involvement has organically created a responsibility and authority for the result.

But then the other-other kind of truth, the 'coming out' / 'core identity' truth - these have no evidence, and they welcome no interpretations. Harder still, the teller expects to be believed. The listener has only their relationship as a stake in the matter. So how do we decide what we believe?

Googling the word truth offers Old English etymologies of 'constancy' and 'disarmament'. I think we'd all admit we'd like our truths to be consistent, and stable, and that admitting new ones asks for a truce and vulnerability from us. We must have faithfulness towards the truth-teller. Because, it's like that phrase, "Truth is in the heart of the believer".

And this community has been faithful to me, as I explore with you my truth-sharing that I am a transgender woman, and I am grateful to come here, to be welcomed and kindly. Thank you for this. I told my kids, last fall, I had discovered a door on the inside of me, a door that I wanted to open. I've known about this door all my life, but it took a long time to unlock it. And as the song lyric from Disney's Moana goes, "The call isn't out there, it's inside me - It's like the tide, always rising and falling." Coming out, a process still ongoing for me, is the beginning of an accomplishment. The goals of my struggle made worthwhile through self-acceptance, and I'm on a journey now, with struggles and accomplishments ahead of me.

Lastly, a thought for those who are troubled to accept another's coming out. Sometimes folks will demand 'Well, why are you making this choice - why can't you choose something else.' I ask you to consider those who strive for challenging goals. The Mount Everest climber; the Novelist; the Artist. Each is drawn by some lure towards struggle, the impractical, and even the perilous. They were called by need. The mountain was there; the need was to climb it. The canvas was blank; the need was to paint it. The words were inside; the need was to write them.

Yes, we choose, we choose to honor the core identity of our needs and, as Richard Wright tells us, we "speak out what we are, and then find we are not alone". We come out because closets are lonely. We come out because we need to share ourselves, to offer that truth into the world, with our vulnerable sincerity, and hope that by doing so, we find we are more closely connected, we find that we are not alone.

Thank you.

<http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2015/03/the-genderbread-person-v3/>