

How Shall I Call Thee?

Pronouns, Gender, Justice, and Respect

Sunday, July 14, 2019

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Blessing Ritual for Recent High School Graduates

Hymns: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth (rev. verse 4: “neighbor, sibling, parent, child); #15, “The Lone, Wild Bird,” #121 “We’ll Build a Land,” (rev. refrain: “Come build a land, where *all of our kindred*, anointed by God, may then create peace.”).



Photo from Portugal by Annie Spratt unsplash.com

Readings

These three readings are from persons who don't identify with the gender binary of male or female.

This reading is a poem “If I Could Fly,” published in a magazine entitled [Beyond the Binary](#). It was written in 2017 by Mar Pan, a poet, artist, and acrobat from Catalonia who lives in London.

If I could fly
I would go towards the second star to the right
and straight on till morning

If I could fly
I would join the fairies
and all the creatures that everyone denies

If I could fly
I would stay a boi for ever
never grow a man or a woman

If I could fly
I would take all the lost queers with me
to a land where judgement is unknown

If I could fly
If only I could fly
Don't you have any pixie dust left?

~

This is a poem entitled [Queer Pride](#), written this year for Pride Month by Kaiden A. Ward, a 20-year-old poet who identifies as agender. ([from Hello? Poetry! website](#))

Queer Pride

Growing up in a culture where
you are not supposed to exist,
you become accustomed to the generosity
of people trying
to fix you, to
force you into a shape
they can understand.

I did not know how exhausting it was,
trying to remain elastic
in a world that demands us to be static,
trapping us in binary boxes where
we wilt in our confinement because,
against societal expectations,
we refuse to suffocate ourselves
for your comfort.

Together, we will stand in the light,
heads held high with unmatched pride
for we have fought too long and
too hard for our right
to be here
to live silently with
our heads bowed low
any longer.

~

This is a poem by Alex Johnson, a gender non-binary person from Rhinelander, Wisconsin. They are 13 years old. ([from Hello? Poetry! website](#))

Not Like You

you ask me why I wear concealing clothes
the truth is that I am trying to cover up the paint that
you have forced upon me
People have sewn in labels and stereotypes into my
skin
it's a constant struggle as I try to rip out the stitching
the second it is gone more is put in place...
people think that its ok to deadname and misgender
me
I'll tell you "its fine! I know it's hard to get used to
it, don't worry!"
but it's not fine, not at all
I am not some practice dummy you can use to
practice what respect is and isn't
I am a human just like you, but I am not like you at
all
you people who use being trans and nonbinary as a
joke
you people who treat trans people as if we are
mentally ill
you people who think its ok to disrespect what and
who we are
you people who debate if we should be allowed to
exist...
I am told to "just accept who I am"
those people don't get/ that I do, they are the ones
who don't.
I am here
I am real
and I am not you



Sermon

Don't run for the doors, but today I'm going to talk about the power of pronouns. And I hope you will try to stay awake also, as this is a religious matter, which I'll explain in a bit. What are pronouns? Pronouns are very common and short words in the English language. Some examples include he, she, it, they, some, and who. A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun. Pronouns usually refer to a name or to another noun that came earlier in a sentence or conversation. Earlier this morning, we used *thou*, an old and out-of-use English pronoun when we sang, "The lone wild bird/ in lofty flight/ is still with thee, nor leaves thy sight. And I am thine; I rest in thee. Great Spirit, come and rest in me." (#15, *Singing the Living Tradition*)

Starting nearly 400 years ago in the history of the language, the words *thou* and *thee* were gradually replaced by *you*. *You* had already existed as a pronoun, but it always been plural. *You* had only meant more than one, like both of you, you all, and you soldiers lining up for battle. It was *thou* which meant only one person. Thou, my friend. Thou, my child. Thou, my neighbor.

Centuries ago, the only time it was usual or standard to call one single person a *you* was to show that the person was of a higher social standing. *You* as a singular pronoun was reserved for a person of higher status. *You* could be used between two people if they were both elites. However, if you were an ordinary, common English person, you would use *thou* to speak to family members, intimate friends, or children. You would say *you* to anyone superior to you, but that person could address you as *thou*, to reflect that you were inferior in the class structure.ⁱ

There was a religious group that would have none of this. The Quakers. Known as the Society of Friends, the Quakers began in England the 1600s.

Founded on the principle of total equality among human beings, the Quakers would call every individual by the pronouns *thou* and *thee*.ⁱⁱ They didn't follow the rule to call a better person *you*, because in the sight of God, nobody is better than anyone else. I can imagine a Quaker saying: "Thou may be a king, but thou are deserving of no name superior to the one I use for my next-door neighbor or a prisoner in the dungeon of thy castle or my friend. Thou art my sibling, dear king."

The British class system lasted well into the 20th century, so you can imagine that in the 17th century, the Quakers' radical ways of treating other people and speaking to everybody as *thou* got them into trouble. Resistance to the social hierarchy was one of many traits that caused them to be persecuted. Many Quakers sailed over to North America, and many ended up in the Quaker William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania.

In any case, after 1800 it became standard in English that *you* referred to one—singular—as well as more than one—plural. That is: *you* means one and more than one *you*. That can be confusing. *Thou* and *thee* didn't vanish altogether but fell out of normal use in English. The use of *thou* continued in poetry, prayers and religious ceremonies. The word *thou* still conveys intimacy—like that between a person and their God, or between two people who are friends, or between lover and beloved. *Thou* expresses affection. *Thou* expresses care and concern. As I said, pronouns are small words, but they are powerful.

Now I want to talk about a word that's a bit longer and a bit less common and familiar.

This word is binary, as in a binary choice. A binary implies a choice between two things. It means a limit of two options: either this, or that. No alternatives, nothing in between; no other options exist. Consider the binary that I see in religion. I've known many folks who felt their individual religious beliefs and practices left them with only a binary choice. *One*, you either belong to a spiritual community where your beliefs don't fit and you have to keep your identity under cover. Or, *two*, you deny yourself participation in a spiritual community altogether, even though you might long to be enriched by the blessings of a spiritual community. Many folks who have come into Unitarian

Universalist congregations find it a pleasant surprise that they did not have to keep silent about something so important as their religious beliefs to participate in a place like this.

When I meet somebody in a social situation, they may ask: "What do you do?" Generally I tell the truth. "I'm a minister."

"Oh that's nice," they say, quickly adding: "but I don't go to church. I'm an atheist."

"Oh sure," I reply. "I have plenty of atheists in my church!" I allow some time to let that sink in. Indeed, the diversity of beliefs in our Unitarian Universalist movement is hard for many people to wrap their minds around, even some UU people. We have Pagans, agnostics, atheists, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims, among others. Last year at UUSS we had one guest minister who is a UU Hindu and another who is a Sikh and a UU. Nearly every UU congregation exists as a denial and a rejection of a binary understanding of religious community. It's not *this or that*—it can be *this and that*. Since it is based on values and not on a creed, a liberal congregation is a living, breathing, hymn-singing example that there are things in-between the limited choices of *this or that* when it comes to religious community and religious expression.

In these times, we are learning that not everybody fits into the box which is the binary choice of man or woman, of boy or girl, of him or her. There is more variety in our gender identities and our gender expressions than can be contained by two genders. Hence, some folks are asking to be referred to by different pronouns. In particular, many nonbinary folks request being referred to not as he or she, him or her, but by the pronoun *they* or *them*.

This is a request for respect. What else could show more basic respect than to acknowledge how others identify themselves and how they express that identity? It's like calling them by the name they give us.

This request may feel good to some but awkward to others—using *they* to refer to one person. It may feel new. But it's not so new. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the singular usage of *they* has appeared in English

writing since the 1400s. There are plays, novels and poems going back that far with the use of *they* to refer to a singular thing or person.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, if a singular *they* was used *in writing* that early, then it probably was used even earlier in spoken conversations.^{iv}

For over 40 years, the National Council of Teachers of English has advised educators on the non-sexist use of language, both in how teachers speak to students and in guidelines for writers. It recommends a singular *they*. On its website, you can read examples of how to use it. Here's one. For a theater teacher to say "every cast member should know his lines by Friday" is not inclusive. But to say "every cast member should know his or her lines" is also not inclusive, because it reflects the gender binary. The gender-inclusive way to say the same thing is this: "Every cast member should know *their* lines by Friday."

Current guidelines for writers from the Associated Press Stylebook and the Washington Post Style Guide, among others, recommend use of the word *they* to refer to a singular noun unless the gender is known.^v However, if a person is requesting a particular pronoun to describe them, then writers are encouraged to honor that request.^{vi} The National Council of Teachers of English says that in a school, teachers who practice this are making sure that students "of all gender identities feel visible, heard, valued, and protected."^{vii} The purpose of this practice, in any community, is to promote respect and belonging.

Many hospital admission forms now ask a patient what pronoun they wish to be known by. Many colleges now invite students to indicate what pronouns work for them. We have nonbinary folks in this congregation, and members of the congregation have nonbinary loved ones in their families. Depending on preference, they may use the word *brother* or *sister* or *sibling*; *daughter*, *son*, or *child*.

When our middle school youth go on a weekend retreat with youth from other Unitarian Universalist congregations, they have a practice of going around the circle and introducing themselves by name and preferred pronouns. This promotes inclusion in the group, and it can raise awareness for

everyone when they get back to their home congregations and schools.

In a recent opinion column in the *New York Times*, Farhad Manjoo writes that everybody ought to use the singular *they*. It's the "perfect pronoun," Manjoo says: "It's flexible, inclusive, unobtrusive and [it avoids] the risk of inadvertent misgendering" of people. Indeed, though Manjoo identifies as a "stereotypical, cisgender, middle-aged suburban dad," the writer asks to be referred to not as he but as *they*. Manjoo will try to refer to everyone else that way as well.^{viii}

However, some nonbinary folks prefer pronouns other than *they*, or in addition to *they*. For example, a person might choose the pronouns *ze* and *zir*. Using an example from guidelines for faculty at Vanderbilt University, a teacher might say: "Ze is a leader on campus." Another example: "Zir contributions were instrumental to the lab's success."^{ix} There are other pronoun sets that don't fall in the gender binary.^x There's quite a history of exploring alternatives, especially in literature. In 1976, Marge Piercy wrote *Women on the Edge of Time*, a book of science fiction. Piercy coined a nonbinary pronoun of PER, or p-e-r, to refer to all persons in the novel. Many artists and scholars have created alternative pronoun sets, as early as 1890, and throughout the twentieth century. The fact that the preference for alternatives is now more widely known does not mean it's new. There have always been human beings who felt that a gender binary did not represent who they were at heart.

As Kaiden A. Ward, age 20, writes in their poem "Queer Pride,"

Growing up in a culture where
you are not supposed to exist,
you become accustomed to the generosity
of people trying
to fix you, to
force you into a shape
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I did not know how exhausting it was,
trying to remain elastic
in a world that demands us to be static,
trapping us in binary boxes where
we wilt in our confinement...

If, like me, you've had the privilege of living easily in one category or another of society's gender binary, you may not be sure how you can be of support, but you wish to be. Here are a few suggestions I've gleaned. For example, the National Center for Transgender Equality that "some people haven't heard a lot about non-binary genders or have trouble understanding them, and that's okay." However, it says, "you don't have to understand what it means for someone to be non-binary to respect them." You don't have to understand everything about people to affirm their dignity and protect their safety.^{xi}

When Reverend Lucy and I attend a gathering of the UU Ministers Association, we are expected to use our name tags to indicate our pronoun choice: he him, she her, ze zir, they them, and so on. We invite you to do that here at UUSS. You can write your preferred pronouns in a corner of your church name tag. Easy. A small step yet a powerful one. Doing so can let somebody know that you seek to be an inclusive person toward folks who don't identify with the gender binary.

Another way to provide support: You can remind others that we can't assume another person's gender expression by looking at them or hearing their name. Making such assumptions can lead to awkwardness or hurt. It's okay to ask.

For example, when I greet someone. "Hello, my name is Roger, and my pronouns are he, him and his. How about you?" It's a sign of respect to ask what someone prefers. However, unless we are invited to ask more questions, it's not a good idea to grill a non-binary or trans person about matters that are personal. These days there are plenty of ways for us to learn and be informed about the issues. I've been reading a book published by our denomination's own [Beacon Press](#). Written by a psychiatrist and a social worker, both of them from the trans and nonbinary community, the book is called "*You're in the Wrong Bathroom!*" *And 20 Other Myths and Misconceptions about Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming People*.

Even with good intentions, using more inclusive pronouns does take practice, and there will be mistakes. If someone points that out to you, it's okay to say, "Thank you for letting me know." If you misgender someone by mistake, it's okay to say:

"Oh, I'm sorry, yes. Thanks for reminding me." Then move on in your conversation. Try to remember it for the future, but move on. To make a big deal out of it because you're embarrassed by your mistake will be only a burden to the other person, when chances are they'd like to move on too. To *intentionally* refer to someone by a pronoun they've asked not to be used for them is willful misgendering. It's hurtful. If you see it happen, consider taking the offending party aside. If that's not a safe option, you could let the hurt person know you are sorry it happened and let them know you see them for who they are.

There are plenty of ways for us to provide support. We can bring up conversations with people who don't know why this is important. I hope you'll take home the insert in your order of service. Entitled [What Should I Call You?](#), it's provided to professors by the LGBTQ center at the University of Wisconsin. No need to take it out now, but I hope you'll take it home and share it with people. When you talk to your friends, say: "You'll never guess what the sermon was last Sunday at my congregation!"

If you do all this explaining to a friend, even give them a copy of the handout, your friend might be curious to come to UUSS with you. I had coffee on Friday with a friend who is a straight male Mormon Sunday school teacher and a business person. He is active in a local LGBT organization (in which I'm a member) because two of his grown children are gay. After coffee I was going back to work on the sermon. As we were parting, he asked me: "What's your sermon about?" I told him: pronouns and the gender binary. "Oh," he said. Then he asked: "Do you have a mailing list you can put me on?"

Of course, other people might not be so curious and open. "Why are you talking about *that* in church?" they might say. "Is that religious?"

"Well, yes it is," you can say, "in our way of being religious." Unitarian Universalism stays open to new ways of understanding. The understanding of truth is not fixed once and for all. It's an open search. It's an evolutionary process. First and foremost, however, as Unitarian Universalists we affirm the dignity and worth of every person. It's not really possible to affirm dignity without showing

respect. And it's not possible to build relationships or build a community if we can't show respect and be respected as who we are. As I mentioned, centuries ago in the history of English language, *thou* was a term of intimacy between two people. Even after the word *you* took its place in standard conversations, *thou* has continued to express affection and equality. *Thou* communicates concern and care and love. This is why pronouns are powerful. This is why the words we speak make a difference. How we hear one another and speak to one another—it's about concern and care and love. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ See, among other sources, "Politeness in Early Modern English," accessed July 12, 2019. <http://www2.nau.edu/~eng121-c/politenessin%20AME.htm>

ⁱⁱ Cheratra Yaswen, "Those who *thee* and *thou*: the second person singular pronoun after 1800," copyright 2003, accessed July 12, 2019.

<http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercycourses/6362Yaswen2.htm>
ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they

^{iv} Denis Baron, "A brief history of singular 'they,'" *Oxford English Dictionary* blog, accessed July 12, 2019
<https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>

^v See, for example, CMOS Shoptalk, *Chicago Manual of Style* website, accessed July 12, 2019.
<https://cmosshoptalk.com/2017/04/03/chicago-style-for-the-singular-they/>

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^{vii} "Statement on Gender and Language," National Council of Teachers of English, October 25, 2018, accessed July 12, 2019.
<http://www2.ncte.org/statement/genderfairuseoflang/>

^{viii} Farhad Manjoo, "The Perfect Pronoun: Singular 'They,'" *New York Times*, July 10, 2019, p. A27, accessed as "Call Me 'They,'" on July 10, 2019.

^{ix} Faculty Senate, Vanderbilt University, "What Should I Call You?," August 2018, accessed July 12, 2019.
<https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-wp0/wp-content/uploads/sites/139/2017/08/13141936/pronoun-poster.png>

^x See chart from Gender Pronouns Guide, University of Wisconsin, Jun 22, 2017, accessed July 12, 2019.
<https://s3.amazonaws.com/campusreform/9702/UMN.jpg>

^{xi} "Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive," National Center for Transgender Equality website, October 5, 2018. accessed July 13, 2019.
<https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-non-binary-people-how-to-be-respectful-and-supportive>