

The Power of Authenticity: My Journey as a Transgender ACPE Educator

Liam Robins

It started with graffiti. Graffiti in Center City, Philadelphia, changed my world. I had felt different all my life and thought it was due to being an only child. Then, in my twenties, when I figured out that I was attracted to women, I thought it was because I was a lesbian. All the years of therapy and CPE units helped me find new ways of communicating, coping, skill sets, etc. But the graffiti helped me find my core identity in a most unexpected and unusual way.

“Jesus loves transgenders.” That’s all it said.

Finally, as a forty-six-year-old, I began to understand and claim my identity as transgender. I now understood why I thought about the world, gender, myself, and even my clothes differently than others. I began a painful yet freeing process of coming out and transitioning to a more male-oriented body and expression of myself in the world, in my family, and in my educational work as an ACPE certified educator—and it has made all the difference!

I have always felt both masculine and feminine. Perhaps because of this disconnect from traditional female identity, I have always been uncom-

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comfortable in my body and in the clothes people expect me to wear. And more than that, I have always been uncomfortable with the assumptions and expectations people have of me due to my presumed gender. I wasn't allowed to play the drums, take karate, or wear pants and high-top sneakers as a kid because those were not seen as appropriate activities or attire for a girl. Some of that may have been narrow interpretations of gender-conforming behavior and clothing, but it was not restricted to my family of origin nor to the cultural expectations of young girls.

After completing divinity school, I attended the mandatory psychological exam to be ordained, and the psychologist questioned me about my choice of clothes. When he asked me "Who taught you how to dress?" I was immediately filled with shame, confusion, and anger. I moved to a defensive position because I assumed he was being biased about my lesbian identity. He was on to something, but neither of us had the words for it. Instead of delving deeper, I closed down and filed him with the others who wanted me to look and behave differently based on feminine stereotypes.

It is important that we all honor the feminine and masculine in each of us and in each of our students and the unique ways they shape us to be who we are.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING TRANSGENDER

As a transgender person, I know intimately how it feels

- to be marginalized
- to be misunderstood by my mental health or medical providers
- to feel demonized by my faith group
- to have to fight for basic human rights as my government seeks to erase me
- to have my personal safety challenged by the culture and society in which I live

As a transgender person, I also know with greater intimacy than many other people the continuum of physical, emotional, and spiritual traits of being human. I am privileged to have carried and breast-fed our oldest child, and I am now privileged to walk down the street without the fear for my safety I carried as a woman. I understand the effects of hormones in my

body during pregnancy and menses, and I also understand the sudden “boy puberty” in my middle-age years that resulted from weekly testosterone shots. My experience being both male and female affords me the opportunity to offer understanding to students of all genders. And I can create a different kind of safety for students to name themselves, however they are, and to talk about hard topics usually not discussed, such as sexuality, identity, trauma, and vulnerability.

HOW MY GENDER CHALLENGES MEN AND WOMEN STUDENTS

My transgender identity took on deeper significance for me with the #MeToo movement because I could relate to women’s experiences on a personal level yet could also challenge men differently since I am not perceived as a woman. I challenge men in two ways. The first and foremost is that I challenge the belief that women are objects men control or own. Second, and more important because it speaks to the quiet undercurrent of rape culture, I challenge men to take responsibility for themselves.

This often comes up naturally in CPE groups as we discuss spiritual care and differing theologies or ideas about spirituality and how that interplays with gender roles, identities, expectations, etc. I find myself wondering out loud, especially to my male CPE students, when they are going to get offended that they aren’t trusted to control themselves. They buy into the lie of our culture that constantly sends the message that women are so sexually powerful that men need to be protected from them. An example of this is religious communities where the men and the women are separated during services so the men won’t be distracted by the women. I think this is the opportune time to teach all people how to relate to each other as sacred valuable humans, which is a natural part of my theology. When we in essence give permission for men to be distracted or tell them they can’t control themselves when told “No,” we strengthen the rape culture that spews lies about men not being able to help themselves and women asking for sex even when they are not. When confronted by this reality, most men are surprised. They have never stopped to think about how separating them from women enhances the rape culture, and they are often ashamed that they haven’t spoken up and stopped it from happening.

CPE students who are women often feel supported by this challenge to the men and find themselves feeling comfortable with my style of supervision, which can feel “feminine” to them even though I present as male in my gender expression. My stories of raising kids, pregnancy, etc., also remind them of many shared experiences we have. One female student recently commented that she had never had a successful relationship with a male supervisor before and that she felt safe with me because of my experience as male and female. That comment was very important to me because I believe there must be a base of safety for learning to occur in CPE. The process is hard and at times feels very risky and vulnerable—but there has to be a base of safety for CPE to work ethically, educationally, and spiritually.

MY GENDER AS AN ISSUE IN SUPERVISION

As an ACPE certified educator, I have always been “out” as a lesbian woman and now as a transperson. I spoke my truth then and now partly to create safety for myself and partly as a screening tool for students. In the beginning of my career, I used this screening tool more so the student could decide if they wanted to screen me out rather than so I might use it to remove them from the potential student list. Even in the South, many students who didn’t agree with my “lifestyle” would accept the offer to learn CPE under my supervision. I would come out and tell them I understood that their theology or denomination did not have the same view on gays and lesbians as I did but that as long as they would be respectful to me and not try to change me, I wouldn’t try to change their view of sexual orientation either. I wanted them to be themselves with a sense of safety, respect, and autonomy.

For meaningful learning to occur in CPE, safety, respect, and autonomy need to be present for the student on many different levels: spiritually/theologically, emotionally, and psychologically. Had I pushed students to accept me by agreeing with me, I would have been violating their autonomy and doing just what the church and others had done to me all my life—not allowing them to be themselves. Instead, I believed that through exposure, experience, and invited curiosity, people find ways to overcome barriers that others have given them along their journey. What surprised me was how many students’ views changed by the end of the unit(s) working with me. They began struggling with their old views as their experience of me as

a spiritually gifted minister, experienced educator, and compassionate and faithful family person naturally challenged their old stereotypes of what I “should have” been like. I’ve only had one male student who struggled to be respectful of me as his educator. Although this reflected his biblical interpretations and his faith affiliation, it was also a sign of his general resistance to learning and being stretched, which was not related to who I am.

MY ROLE AND IMPACT IN THE INSTITUTION

Just as I spent many years being out as a lesbian woman, I trust that same process when I am working with students now as an out transgender person. I still speak up about my experience and use my identity as a teaching tool with students and with my clinical environment. My hospital system is undertaking a Diversity Respect and Inclusion initiative to train all employees about issues of diversity and how to expand from tolerance to true inclusiveness. The interactive training model started two years ago when all the leaders (managers up to the CEO) participated in two days of training to help them understand the intersectionality of diversity. Their training was geared to empower them to work with diverse employees and to understand the importance of providing quality healthcare to everyone. All nonmanagerial employees are now taking a similar training that is one full day and focuses on providing patient care to diverse patients and families. For both groups, the training also facilitates relationships among staff from diverse backgrounds.

As an ACPE certified educator/chaplain, I am considered at the management level of leadership and thus participated in the two-day training model. The facilitator recognized my educational skills during that training and invited me to be part of the faculty and lead or co-lead sessions. I am out as a transperson as I lead these trainings in order to provide a living example of the need for the training. Through the training, I have the opportunity to demonstrate that people who are members of the GLBTQIAP community is a normal part of life and of our hospital system as well. There is something powerful about meeting face-to-face in this safe environment that can change a person’s perspective differently than didactic learning of facts and figures; the personal encounter has a greater impact in challenging perceptions and leading to positive change. Through using my voice, I

create safety for myself and for so many others who need a space to be safer so they can step out into it—safer for all kinds of diversity issues, not just gender identity and expression.

NORMALIZING GENDER INCLUSIVITY

I can use my position of privilege in other ways to demonstrate my authenticity and make diverse gender expression part of normative culture. Currently, my signature on my work emails includes my preferred gender terms (they and he variants). I have not had any students complain about my being transgender, but I have had students wonder why I talk about it and ask, “When will you stop doing that?” My response is that I will stop when it isn’t needed anymore. I’ll stop when everyone is safe to be themselves, whatever that is—gay, trans, black, Asian, etc. I think the first screening tool I now have with potential students is my email signature, and once they see it they can choose to apply to our CPE program or go elsewhere. This subtle yet present way of expressing myself is itself a coming out with each email I send. Being transgender allows me to discuss how gender is a social construct that we live within.

THE POWER OF THE AUTHENTIC

When I was a student in ACPE CPE, I saw my CPE experience as a time of growth personally and professionally. I still think of CPE as a process that invites each individual to be authentic, experience personal growth, learn compassionate skill sets, and experience being part of “healing” themselves as well as those to whom they offer spiritual care. Early in my training process to become a certified educator, I received some pushback on having children during my process because it would slow me down. I countered that if CPE is all about being authentic, that meant I should not stop living while I engaged the CPE training. That is still true for me as a transgender educator; I need to bring my authentic self to my work and personal life. Our power in our ministry is being authentic; it is only fitting that I use my whole self as a differently gendered person and share how that identity changes how I see and experience the world, G-d, others, and myself.

This “truth” about authenticity is what I live and teach to CPE students, especially if there is a barrier in their faith group to who they are. None of us can minister well if we are using our emotional and spiritual energy to hide ourselves from those who will judge us. Because I know the power of safety, privilege, and authenticity—and I know the harm that comes from not being safe, from powerlessness, and from hiding—my theology of hospitality remains strong as I look to the margins for the unheard, invisible, and disenfranchised. My trans identity is a gift I bring to my students as a powerful teaching tool, and I will continue to utilize it until there is no more need for it. Through Judaism, I have learned the saying, “Until we are all free, we are no one of us free.” I seek to live by that saying and to bring it into my CPE experience.

NOTES

- 1 Emma Lazarus (1883), as quoted in “A Quote from Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Jewish Women's Archives*, <https://jwa.org/media/quote-from-epistle-to-hebrews>. Most people are familiar with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of similar words, but Lazarus wrote this much earlier.