

## Loving thy Queer Neighbor

Hello everyone, I thought you might be tired of seeing the back of my head as I conducted the choir, so I came up here to flash my award-winning smile. Some weeks ago I expressed my concern for welcoming new members to the church, specifically queer persons, especially after experiencing being misgendered and misunderstood. These moments were not malicious, and they were mistakes made in love, but they still had an effect on me that I'd like to share with you today. Before I spill my innermost tea I'd like to provide you with some context: queer history and the history we live through today, in an attempt to inform our empathy for one another.

L-G-B-T-Q-I-A-2S+ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two Spirit. The gay alphabet keeps expanding and these terms can really get away from you especially when queer culture might not be in your immediate social circle. Questions create uncertainty, uncertainty can be exploited.

The current administration seeks to divide us through the use of misinformation-leaning on scary-sounding phrases like "Radical Gender Ideology," and outright lies to dehumanize and demonize queer people. This is colonialism still at work in our lives and it is not the first time these tactics have been used to oppress.

What we now think of as gender non-conforming people have existed for as long as people have existed. The Aztecs depicted genderless gods and had drawings of priests in feminine clothing. Ardhanarishvara is a prominent example of a Hindu god who embodies both male and female characteristics. But throughout history, it was not understood as "non-conformity" it was just existence.

In Mexico there is documentation of Muxe people, the third gender, dating far back as 1521. The folklore goes that <sup>2</sup>San Vicente Ferrer, the patron saint of Juchitán, was carrying three bags of seeds meant to be distributed around the world. The first contained male seeds, the second contained female seeds and a third bag contained a mixture of the two. But as San Vicente was passing through Juchitán, the third bag ruptured – and from it sprang the town's famed community of muxes. Starting la muxiedad.

So why don't we hear more about this history- our shared history? Why do we have such uncertainty about gender and sexuality and the roles they play in our society? It comes down to colonialism and, unfortunately, the work of the Christian

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church. Colonizers sought to reduce indigenous people to “animal” status, often through sexual violence and harsh labor exploitation that often resulted in death. Colonizers spread the gender ideology held firm by the Catholic church that there is a strict dichotomy between men and women. Heterosexual purity is a crucial characteristic of this dichotomy, which led to the elimination and repression of homosexuals and third-gender people in rituals, decision-making, and economics, often by violent means (Allen, 1986; Horswell, 2003; Lugones, 2007; Sigal, 2003).”

Did you know that In Anishinaabemowin, a native language that spans over a large area of our continent, that there are 20 distinct terms for gender expression? Ranging from man, woman, spirit of a man inside a woman, manly woman and so on. How amazing to be so specific and descriptive. It can feel complex or overwhelming to take in, but ponder this-

On bening Muxe, Felina Santiago offered: “We are people of two spirits [...] We are the duality, neither man nor woman. You are neither less nor more.”

There is so much out there besides the binary that we are taught. To exist outside of the norm as I do now is an act of protest. To be Trans-femme Nonbinary as I stand before you is an act of decolonization, and defiance of our indoctrination into strict gender norms. My cha-cha heels are combat boots, my make-up is war paint, my beard is my right. The following statements might shock you but, this is a woman's beard. This is a woman's voice. This is how women look sometimes.

As of April 18th, over 850 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been filed in 2025 so far, the most in US history; majority are specifically anti-trans. Among other things they target “bathroom access, IDs, medical care, even the legality of one's identity.” This may be surprising to some of you but to my queer community this is just the next phase in an ongoing coordinated attack against us; Republicans have been ramping it up yearly since 2020 when there were only a little over 100 anti-queer bills filed. They were angry after gay marriage passed with such overwhelming support, so to reverse the advance of progressive ideals they started working away at the very outermost fringes where public support would be least concentrated. They started with exaggerating the “issue” of trans women competing in women's sports to rile people up and get a foot in the door, moved on to undermining the (scientifically demonstrated) validity of gender affirming care for trans youth, brought on drag

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bans and bathroom restrictions, and are now stepping up those attacks to chip away at our basic ass rights to exist and go out in public. This is why I speak today on how to love thy neighbor, queer people deserve to feel safe. We are fighting every day, and when we come into a safe space and get misgendered we are sent into fight or flight, we are reminded that the fight is never over.

So how do we love our queer neighbors through this?

Trans-femme mechanic, Jai Santora, has a unique story that offers some insight. Jai noticed that as she started to dress more feminine work, her customer base was vanishing. So when invited to do an interview about her auto shop she jumped at the chance to shine a spotlight on her "Gay-raj." Jai fielded all manner of questions, but one of them stopped her in her tracks: "So what was it like coming out as the owner of an automotive repair shop?" to which she replied, "Coming out? Who said I was out? I wasn't!" Jai had only told a small circle of people and felt flustered. She recalls wanting to shut down the conversation and end it there. "Then it all hit [her] all at once— [she] had been living in hiding [her] entire life. [She] refused to continue living in the shadows." So she re-upped her insurance on the shop and prepared for the worst as she told her story.

To her surprise the phones started ringing off the hook, she suspected they were hate-callers, but they were customers! The gays flocked to her from near and far crossing state lines and driving for a few days just to feel safe from discrimination. Even Jai's straight clientele increased; they appreciated her authenticity and honesty. They didn't need to completely understand everything, as long as you're being true to yourself."

So, how do we address the hate we see throughout the country? In automotive terms, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." But the squeaky wheel is usually the minority opinion. So, we need more visibility and representation. We need more people to be loud and proud, and more consistency from allies.

Every year, trans individuals throughout the country and the world lose their lives due to violence against our community. These are vibrant people who often lead very loving lives that are cut short due to hatred. Trans individuals are moms

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and dads, brothers and sisters, doctors, lawyers, politicians, neighbors, and friends. We're everywhere, and there's no reason for the hatred directed towards us.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus sets the example that you should do as he has done for you. Pastor Scott spoke earlier this year about the intimacy behind Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Acts of intimacy and care are not beneath you. It is not enough to know someone's pronouns and use them every now and then. We need allies to be more consistent, and more persistent. Support queer businesses, shelters, medical centers, donate your time, your resources to your neighbors. For a list of Queer businesses and the like- check the welcome table. Or like my choir and congregation have done for me, accept me wholly, offer hand-me-downs, offer help or a listening ear. Affirm people when you can, offer rest and comfort from the daily fight. I know that it is hard to learn new things, just as hard as it might be to endure the awkward pain of kneeling before your friend to wash their feet. It is not beneath any of us.

I would like to offer you all a practice I do when I meet queer people or people I may not understand. Because believe it or not, I struggle with using the correct pronouns for people. I am right here with you on this journey to rewire my brain, to decolonize my thoughts. This is my secret. When I meet someone new, I think of them before I sleep or when I am in a moment of free time. I pray for them. I repeat their pronouns over and over and then I affirm them.

Are you familiar with the practice of gratitude? To combat negativity you flip the script from thinking about everything you don't have and appreciate everything you do have. I do the same with gender non-conforming/ trans people. It is so easy to see all the characteristics that disqualify a person. To list all the traits of a person that doesn't line up with your views of what you think their gender should be. So when I hold a person in my thoughts I list all the ways that they do exemplify their identity. I'll use myself as an example because I am the one queer person I KNOW you all know. If I were to have met me I would lay down and list things like “Petite! her long hair, her woman's smile, the way she holds herself, the nurturing she does for people. Oh! I made myself blushing- And then if I was feeling feisty I would tackle all the reasons that disqualify that person as their identity and challenge my perspective. Her hands are large. She has large hands to do woman things with- it can be silly, it doesn't always have to be so serious! This is an act of intimacy, of

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service to another person. You are preparing your heart to hold that person and to honor them, and what is more like Jesus than that?

Just as our Muxe friend Felina Santiago said “you are neither less nor more.”

So you meet a person, you suspect they're queer-maybe it's the blue hair, or the same-sex partner on their arm, or maybe they are a towering, heel wearing-bearded thing standing before you. How to approach? Well... don't be weird, say hello! Your curiosity is burning and you feel a question on the tip of your tongue. STOP, ask yourself why am I curious about that? In my opinion there are two types of curiosity when meeting anyone. Curiosity that lets you avoid using google, and curiosity that helps you understand and protect a person better. Questions should not make people justify themselves to you rather than introduce themselves. Questions about genitals, who they sleep with, who is the spoon or the fork in the relationship, or why that person might wear a beard are inappropriate.

The best way to introduce yourself to a queer person is to say “Hi my name is Gabi, I use she/her and they/them pronouns. What is your name? How would you like me to refer to you? What pronouns do you use.” Including your pronouns when introducing yourself makes it feel normal to share that information, because it is! You are opening that door in a loving and inviting way for people. And from there you can have a normal conversation. Because like Jai said, “Trans individuals are moms and dads, brothers and sisters, doctors, lawyers, politicians, neighbors, and friends. We're everywhere[!]” and the divide between us is an illusion. We all know grief, we all now love, we all know loss and joy.

But what about my questions?! Do the work at home or go meet people in the community. If you want to understand people then you may have to do some research of your own. Or if it is just a burning question and you must ask a person then please, ask if that person is in a headspace or is feeling safe enough to field uncomfortable questions. Give them the right to choose whether or not to engage. They might say no! And I hope that makes you happy that someone was brave enough to take the offer of safety and comfort that you extended their way. And remember, you do not need to understand a person fully to love them wholly.

Amen.

