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An epiphany of transgender lives reveals diversity in body of Christ

James and Evelyn Whitehead | Jan. 5, 2013
Viewpoint

Epiphany: insight or sudden realization. A revelation that both illumines and surprises.

Jan. 6, Feast of the Epiphany. Coming as it does so early in the year, the celebration still seems to arrive a little late. Christmas festivities and holiday meals, topped off with New Year's Eve parties, have more than filled our feasting needs. Now it is time to get back to diets and email. Yet something about this day still grabs our attention. Epiphany is a feast of "something's up." With portents in the sky and the hint of myrrh in the air, perhaps we're being signaled: Stay alert -- this could be the year!

The first epiphany sprang a large surprise: a vulnerable infant who is God's own son. How likely is that? The annual feast invites us to expect the unexpected, to be aware that graces come from surprising sources. Perhaps this year -- within your family or your work site or your faith community -- you may hear a personal story of courage and faith shared by a transgender person. This will be an epiphany and a grace.

To our own surprise, we have been blessed by such an epiphany. The past year has brought us deeper appreciation of the experience of transgender members of the human community. Mentored by a Catholic sister who has dedicated her life to ministry among transgender persons, we have been instructed by the witness of these often vulnerable members of the body of Christ. Their life stories carry a common theme: an abiding sense of "disconnect" between their inner sense of self and the evidence of their body. In their deepest awareness, gender identity (who I know myself to be) has been in conflict with the social role their physical anatomy suggests (who others expect me to be).

Attempting to conform to the expectations of their parents, spouses and children, transgender persons often struggle to override this sense of disconnect. Some enter into marriage, hoping this will suppress the daily reminders that they are not as they appear. Many more put effort into presenting a "false self" to the world, to protect against being discovered for who they really are. But the price of this unnatural effort is high. Alcohol and drugs offer false comfort along the way; suicide begins to appeal as an exit from this distress.

Those who are fortunate find the strength, often with the help of a therapist or spiritual director, to begin the journey toward self-acceptance. For most transgender persons, completing this transition takes several years. For some, the transition includes hormone treatment and gender-confirming surgery. And many report a profound shift in their spiritual lives, as they turn from the condemnation of a judging God ("You are going to hell") to the embrace of a God of paradox and extravagant love. This harrowing transition leads many to a confident embrace, at last, of "the person God always intended me to be."

The losses entailed in this transition are often grave: Earlier relationships are put at risk -- one's family ties, employment, network of friends. Many transgender persons resonate with the plight of the outcasts who so often appear in the Bible. Discrimination and threats of violence require daily vigilance. But the gains, too, are substantial: The false self, who has served as façade over many years, now falls away. The self who remains is

highly vulnerable, but authentic at last.

Theologian Justin Tanis, writing of his own gender transition, describes a movement from restless desolation toward self-acceptance: "So many of my colleagues have commented to me that I am so much more peaceful and calm in the years since I transitioned. They say I always seemed angry, driven and unhappy before." Tanis came to understand the roots of this sense of spiritual restlessness: "I had not found a home within myself where I could be genuinely myself."

The experience of gender diversity is gaining greater social visibility, and with this an increase in empathy. Many older Americans recall the transition of Christine Jorgenson. Born George Jorgenson, she became a celebrity after traveling to Denmark in 1952 for gender-confirming surgery. To many Americans at that time this procedure seemed exotic, probably illegal and probably immoral. Two decades later, two well-known public figures -- tennis star Renée Richards and author Jan Morris -- transitioned in public view. Their obvious abilities and well-documented successes -- both before and after transitioning -- rendered their transgender status less exotic, perhaps even acceptable.

In recent years, more transgender persons are publically acknowledging the transformations that have brought them to a more integrated life. Acclaimed filmmaker Lana Wachowski, for example, was born Larry Wachowski. She transitioned during the hiatus between her work on the "Matrix" film series and the later movie "Cloud Atlas." In a recently published interview Wachowski observed, "I chose to change my exteriority to bring it closer into alignment with my interiority."

Many Catholics regret that official statements of the Catholic church continue to support rigid notions of human nature, especially in regard to male and female gender. Here church leaders, consciously or not, continue a strategy that distances them from the genuine experience of many active church members. Official statements often mention the extravagant conduct of sexual exhibitionists or drug-addicted sex workers as typical of transgender persons. Hiding in plain sight are the many mature transgender Catholics in our own parishes. To remain willfully ignorant of, or contemptuous toward, this part of the human community exhibits a startling lack of compassion.

Let us pray that in the months ahead each of us -- whether transgender or otherwise -- may experience the grace of epiphany. May we meet one another in shared humanity, ready to move beyond hesitancy and suspicion on all sides. In the grace of these encounters we are likely to be surprised; we may at first feel uncomfortable. But these, perhaps, are marks of an epiphany. And if we stay alert, we may soon recognize here the splendid diversity of the body of Christ.

MORE

Read the Whiteheads' essay [1] about the spiritual journeys of transgender persons.

[James and Evelyn Whitehead have long been associated with the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago. A major focus of their teaching and writing is the vital links between sexuality and spirituality. Currently, they are examining the experience of transgender adults and the pastoral responses of communities of faith.]

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