

WHO DO I SAY THAT I AM?

Jakob Hero

“One of the striking things I am realizing ... is how incredibly messy both love and death are,” writes Jakob Hero as he talks about his own experience as a queer transgender male Christian and reflects on how the experiences of his own ambiguities help him minister to his grandparents in their ambiguities around gender, death and faith.

Multiply Identified

People have been asking me why I am preaching today — it has been pointed out that this is BiSpirit, not TransSpirit Sunday. Well, thankfully Metropolitan Community Church San Francisco tends to be a more enlightened crowd, so I don’t necessarily have to explain that **those letters, L, G, B and T are not mutually exclusive. One is not LGB or T. Transpeople do in fact have sexual orientations and some of us have multiple sexual orientations.**

I could give you a simple answer to this if I had one, but I don’t. I am a transsexual man. I was born female, identified as a lesbian until I was about 23 years old, when I transitioned to male and promptly came out as a gay man. First of all, let me just say that I was a terrible lesbian. I used to get painful crushes on my gay male friends. When I first started living as a man and realized that I could actually date gay men I declared that identity for myself.

What I neglected to acknowledge initially was that in my lesbian years I had truly and deeply loved the women with whom I had been. In my urgency to adopt a fully male life I almost forgot that excited and nervous feeling of falling in love in 11th grade with Ingrid, a fellow member of the girl’s soccer team at my high school. In my eagerness to live up to my gay male identity I shunned the reality of my marriage to Aloha, at 21 years of age — an age when I was far too young to realize that I could not promise myself to another person when I did not even know who I was yet.

But **the reality of who I am is not simply explained away by these labels**--a gay man who used to be a lesbian. I am a person who has loved women and men. I am a man who is partnered with another man. But I am also a person who still loves both women and men. I have embraced, touched, made love to the bodies of men and of women and of people who were living at the various stages between those two sexes. I have loved many different types of people in many different ways.

Multiple Perspectives

I have experienced in my own body a variety of gender realities from a number of different vantage points. I have been called many things, daughter, son, sister and brother. The kids who tormented me in high school called me “dyke.” After college I lived as an illegal alien in Croatia, doing LGBT human rights work. The people who shouted at me in the streets called me *peder*, a Croatian insult for homosexual men. And while not all of these labels still fit me, I would not trade my experience of having worn them — even though they may have felt terribly wrong at the time. Just because I value these experiences does not mean that it has come without cost. There is a little boy in Florida whom I have not been allowed to see for nearly five years now who called me mom. In terms of religious labels — I did not become Christian until college.

In view of all the labels I have been throwing around I invite you to close your eyes and think about: what defines you? Is it who you love, who you sleep with? Do you cease being gay or lesbian

when you are without a date? Does the fact that I am a man who is partnered with another man erase the long history I have of loving women? Even when I date women and dating other people is an accepted part of the covenant I have with my partner, when I date women am I any less queer? I still look and sound and act queer, even if I am holding the hand of someone of the opposite sex.

I have come to find, the older I get, that the things that define me are the experiences I have had, where I have been, what I have done — not the assumptions that other people place on me. Not the neat little packaging people try to give to life. **Who did *you* say I was, when you first saw me?** Would your opinion have changed if someone had nudged you, pointed in my direction and said, “See that guy over there — he used to be a girl?”

Since I am very open about my trans status, people at this church and at other MCC churches have felt it was okay to ask me **outrageously inappropriate questions** about what is in my pants and how I use the equipment that I may or may not have. Often I think that these questions aren’t literally about my genitalia. I like to think that when someone turns to me during the passing of the peace or while we are singing a hymn and asks me whether or not I have a penis — and yes this happens in this very church — that **they are just trying to better understand where I fit, how to categorize me.**

So when they ask whether I sit or stand when I urinate — and yes people really have asked me that in church — I think they do so in order to feel more comfortable with the feelings of ambiguity that surround an individual who has occupied many different spaces in his life. People are naturally uncomfortable with anything that seems different or quite literally, queer. I believe that God called me to be queer. I see the evolution of my sexual orientation throughout my life as evidence, not of my own depravity as some might argue, but of God’s intention for me to be a person who is oriented toward a variety of sexual attractions. I believe that God called me to be queer. But being queer is not just about who you take to your bed. It is about how you relate to the world, how you present yourself and the choices you make — your internal sense of self.

Life is Messy!

I am at an interesting time in my life now. I have gone beyond my ‘coming out’ stage of my teen years, the self-obsessed years of my transition and the coming-out-again stage of my twenties. Now that I am rather comfortable at the stage I am at in life, I have found that suddenly I have the time and energy to focus on things that don’t necessarily have to do with my sex or gender.

I am deeply enmeshed in the end-of-life care of my grandparents, Nickie and Andrew Hero. They are rather interesting folks: they are atheists and bikers who owned a Harley Davidson shop for 50 years or so. The local priest in the small Alabama town where they live has been coming by for the last couple of years for regular visits, in order to put “*the fear of the Lord*” in them. One of the blessings of my grandmother’s dementia is that she no longer obsesses about the destination of her soul after each of his visits.

The priest is sent over by my extended family, all of whom practice a strange hybrid of Catholicism and Southern fundamentalist Christianity that comes right out of the Louisiana bayou country and exists in pockets all over the Gulf Coast. As I watch the painful process my grandparents are going through, I do believe that faith could be helpful to them in this time of their lives. But the Catholic Church has hurt them and, my grandfather especially, cannot reconcile with the legalistic religion of his youth. Here I am reminded of the devastating effects of the fear-based rhetoric that shapes much of Christian theology which functions as a type of spiritual terrorism in the lives of anyone who does not fit into the traditional concept of “Christian.”

One of the striking things I am realizing as I care for my grandparents is **how incredibly messy both love and death are.** I literally have never known a couple — gay or straight — who is more in love than

these two and this complicates the dying process, as neither wants to let go of the other; especially because, as atheists, they believe that there is nothing after this life. But Nickie suffers from severe dementia and each day the woman who she once was gets replaced more and more by a sad, confused and often angry stranger.

My mentally-sound grandfather (whom everyone just calls “Hero”) clings to her, hoping that his failing heart and kidneys will hold out just long enough for Nickie to never have to be alone. I use their lives as an example, not just because I just spent the majority of my summer vacation at their house, but also because they embody two things that I believe are necessary to explore in the context of queerness and faith: fear and gender expectations.

Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid.

I believe that it was fear that drove both of them away from the church; fear of being controlled, fear of doing the ‘wrong’ thing, fear of the judgment of a scary God who watches your every move. **Fear is a motivating force for many people to ‘come to Christ,’ but it also drives countless others away from the church. I think this is especially true for queer people and anyone who does not conform to normative gender expectations.**

It has been gender expectations — or more precisely gender ambiguities — that have always defined my grandmother and, by extension, the man who has adored her for the last 65 years. Nickie is a tough woman who up until relatively recently had amazing physical strength, rode her own motorcycle and generally disrupted the stereotype of a typical woman. Nickie and Hero do not see themselves as transgressive and certainly not as queer or even as feminists. However, the ways that they have always subverted expected gender norms have made them feel that their lives were fundamentally incompatible with most of the church-going folks that they knew. To put it bluntly, the way that Nickie looked, dressed and acted made it impossible for the two of them to conform and to blend. They were not welcome in many social contexts, especially the church.

Many of us are also are totally unwilling to acknowledge the physical reality of where we will end up when our bodies begin to fail us. The end of life is messy. It is ugly. It usually involves unpleasant smells. And often it is a degrading process. In light of these facts, **what would it mean to “queer” the dying process?** Both cognitive and physical disabilities mean that we must re-learn how to relate to the world, how to function and how we will eventually approach our last days. No matter how ready a person might think he or she is to face his or her mortality, it is a rare person who does not find this process uncomfortable, awkward or in some way *queer*.

A primary draw of the fear-based forms of Christianity in my view is the “us” verses “them” terminology. People experience these teachings from the position of “saved” and feel justified in celebrating the exclusive place of comfort they will go to, while others suffer on earth for not having true faith in Jesus Christ as the one true Lord. As a queer Christian I certainly am not alone in experiencing the rejection and judgment from LGBT and queer people who are totally exhausted by the fear-based rhetoric used to discriminate against them. **I think that this rhetoric is why there have even been times when I felt more judged by my non-Christian queer-identified friends than from straight Christians.** I think that it comes from a fear of judgment. The people with whom I share sexual or gender minority status feel that they risk more in talking to a Christian than a Christian feels she or he has at stake in talking to a queer person. Of course, this is anecdotal and a generalization, but it is based on many years of experience and heartbreak, as I have tried to decipher how to navigate through the world as a queer person of faith.

While my grandparents would never conceptualize their peculiar relation to binary gender expectations as being *queer*, the way that they have responded to my Christianity is nearly identical to the reactions of

my LGBT friends, especially those who — like my grandparents — knew me before my conversion to Christianity. Once I started to call myself a Christian a wall was put up between us. It is important to note here, that I am not talking about the same kind of hesitant reaction that family or life-long friends have to any major change a person undergoes — I mean, it wasn't easy for them either when I came out as gay or when I transitioned.

But in the case of my spiritual evolution I found in them and in others a profound sense of betrayal, where I have suddenly been placed in the category of “them” and no longer one of “us,” the latter camp being rational and trustworthy and the former being superstitious and judgmental. And while Nickie and Hero are blind to the clear overlap between her gender performance and a lack of acceptance in the predominantly Christian society they belong to, they certainly have seen some of their family members turn their backs on me because of my transition from female to male. Nickie has experienced similar rejection throughout her life because of her own gender performance and as a result they have both always been hyper-sensitive to anyone who might potentially judge them, another trait they share with the LGBT and queer communities.

Returning to the Familiar

An interesting thing about Nickie's dementia is that she recently developed a desire to return to the familiar patterns of her childhood. I was totally shocked to see that the priest now brings her communion on Sundays. Although what I have read about dementia says that picking up old patterns from childhood is a typical behavior, I was surprised to see this self-avowed atheist turn to the priest who used to come over and upset her. I do not think it is even remotely coincidental that she is now able to take Catholic communion and she also happens to be too frail to participate in any of the gender transgressive behaviors that made her unwelcome in the church.

I also know that this is not simply about appreciating patterns from childhood. On some level she is doing this because she knows that the end of her life or at least the end of her ability to speak and function, is near. I am not sure whether this points to the fact that the scare tactics have finally “worked” or not. But what I do know is that while the priest sees this as a win for his side of some ongoing contest, I do not think that an 84-year-old woman with severe dementia accepting a wafer on her tongue is any sort of victory for Christianity, especially in light of the 70 or so years of fear and spiritual isolation that preceded this death-bed conversion.

To me this is reminiscent of the return to Christianity that so many people experienced during the so-called “AIDS years.” Part of the oral history of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (which is shared by those who were here in the late 1980s and early 1990s) is the story of the hundreds of sick people who joined or started attending MCCSF just before their deaths. At the time, Revs. Jim Mitulski and Penny Nixon shared the pulpit and, with that, the responsibility of doing about one memorial service every single day.

In a lecture I attended during a course on queer religious leadership at Episcopal Divinity School last summer, Mitulski shared with us that, **as many of these men approached death and came to MCCSF for refuge, it was not MCCSF or even their families, to whom they left their estates, but the churches of their childhood.** He told us this was almost always done with the urging of these churches and that these same churches would accept their estates but then refuse to give these men Christian burials because of how they died.

“This Is Not Who I Am”

With this in mind I would like to return to my previous suggestion about the queering of the dying process, particularly in the context of ministry as a necessary component of end-of-life care. What is the real meaning of end-of-life care? Is a last-minute conversion to Christianity really the goal at all? And traditionally what has been the *real* motivation of these conversions?

My grandmother called me to her side one evening a few weeks ago, not by what she said, but with the way she looked over at me as I sat at the kitchen table reading. I put down my book and came over to sit next to her. She called me by my brother's name, then she called me "Joe" — she knew it wasn't quite right, but she settled on that name. "Joe, **don't remember me like this. This is not who I am. I am not some frail old lady.**"

As she fought against her current identity, based on the biological reality of the current state of her body, I finally realized *why* I understood how she was feeling. **She is in transition and my queer experience as a person who has transitioned among sexual orientations and gender identities gives me empathy for her situation.** Nickie told me that she is not the woman her body tells her she should be. Her true identity is that of the strong, powerful, woman she once was.

My connection to her current situation has everything to do with timing: it is about believing yourself to be the person you once were or the person you know you will become. Many years ago I was in the body of a young woman but knew that I was not the woman society expected me to be, I was the man I would become. I just had not become that person yet, but I knew I would be. I knew *that* was the *real* me, even when I was not yet sure what that reality would be like. I did not *become* that man by taking hormones or having surgeries. **I became the man I am by believing — by truly knowing — that was who I was and who I would always be.**

The biological fact of my female birth sex did not have to dictate the gender performance of the rest of my life, the way I behaved, who I fell in love with, what I would call myself. Even back when I did not yet look or sound like a man, the internal ontological reality of my identity was male. I did not need facial stubble or a flat chest to dictate that reality. I *already* knew myself to be male. The people who loved me called me by my chosen name and when they spoke of me they used male pronouns, even though it was terribly hard for them to remember to do so, since I did not yet *look or sound* male. They constructed a reality for me in which I was a man, regardless of the "essential" nature of my birth sex. They recognized the real me and eventually I was able to use modern medical technology so that my body could catch up with my identity.

The queer reality of the end of life is that we start to experience every part of life in a way that feels foreign and strange. Our bodies no longer live up to the fundamental realities of who we know ourselves to be. Just as I felt that my body had been hijacked by breasts and menstruation, Nickie's has been hijacked by a list of ailments too lengthy to describe here.

As I sat by Nickie that night I noticed she had started "twilighting" — a typical trait of dementia in which the patient gets increasingly more and more confused the more tired they get. She was trembling, as she often does. I covered her with a blanket and she mumbled something about World War II. Keeping in mind the importance of the realities we construct for ourselves, I was reminded that not all constructed realities are bad. I chose to take on the role of male, I *became* a man. And I am grateful for the biological realities of testosterone that have changed the way I relate to the world. **I believe that we do not have to shun something that makes us feel whole and alive just because in a certain context it may be "constructed."** If there were an injection or a surgery that could fix Nickie, I would travel to the end of the earth so she could have it.

I put my hand over Nickie's and I helped reconstruct a reality for her with stories she has told me throughout my life. I told her that she was a riveter in an airplane factory during the war and that she was lucky that Hero's motorcycle accident had kept him from having to go off and fight. She said out loud the name of the airplane factory where they both worked. I told her that she loves to climb inside the nose of the planes she helps to build. She told me it was the weight of the rivet gun that was making her hands shake. She imitated the noise the gun makes and fell asleep with a big, beautiful, smile on her face.

I sat there with her in that queer place and I cried while she slept. For her there was nothing constructed about that reality. She was back in 1943. She was younger than I am today. In many ways I can see that she has already slipped away from us and no matter how much I try to theorize this situation, as I look at Nickie all I can think of is how messy the end really is and how meaningless all of these self imposed labels are when we reach the end of our time on earth. This is the mess that is caused by love and death, not just in its wake, but also in its presence, as we know (and even hope) that the end is near.

Leave Nothing Behind

So what does all of this mean? I hope that on Bispirit Sunday as we come together as a family of faith to worship together in this space, that each of us can consider the significance of the relationships we have with one another. We can come to this space as people who love one another, people who have relationships, both platonic and sexual, that we honor the space we create with each other here.

I would challenge you to remember the relationships you have had in your lives, before you ‘became’ what you are today. Those of you who have had previous heterosexual marriages, remember your previous loves. I challenge you to love the people you were with who you are not with today. But what’s more, I challenge you to love the person you used to be. **You do not have to go through a gender transition to feel detached from your own pasts. But the path you walked, no matter how tumultuous, brought you to this space. God called you on that path and God brought you here. By honoring yourself you honor God.** I challenge you to think of those bodies you have held in your arms — we are a community that is defined by who we hold onto.

Who do you say I am? I tell you that I am a man who loves other men. I am a man who loves women. I am a parent to a child I am not allowed to see, to hold. I am someone who has held in my arms the frail body of someone I love, someone who used to be so vibrant and prayed that God take her away, to end my grandparents’ suffering. I have held people who are no longer with us. The people I have held, the experiences I have tucked into my heart, are probably not all that different from what you have tucked in yours. And this, above all else, tells me that I am and that we are children of God.

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