

MY FATHER JESSICA

Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay

Elizabeth Macaulay is an ordained Elder in the United Methodist church, serving as Lead Pastor at Richfield UMC in South Minneapolis. Macaulay offers a poignant personal story about her late father, a minister in the United Church of Christ, who kept his gender identity secret most of his life while caring for his congregation through pastoral work and progressive political efforts.

My story and that of my father Jessica are near impossible to tease apart. Her witness will not be stilled.

My father was born in the late 1920's. He was the first-born male child, much beloved. From an early age he was also much jumbled, because the “not right” in his own sense of being was with him always. While he pursued the boy-child engagements of his culture: Boy Scouts and sports and dash, he was drawn to the silk and soft of the things that bespoke woman. He had a cache of the sorts of adornments a child born into woman flesh would cherish and take for granted. He kept them hidden in the dark of his closet, taken out and worn whenever he could get the chance for self-expression.

And he was caught by his father. “What sort of sick was this?” he was asked. It was a question familiar to him, because it lived with him every day of his life. What sort of sick, indeed.

High school was friends and folly and women and jousting with authority figures. College was much of the same. World War II found him serving in the Pacific playing his tuba among other things and when he came back, he enrolled in seminary. What better place to muck about with God? What better way to atone for the shame that would not loose its grip?

Along the way, he courted and won the hand of a woman, my mother. She who was beautiful and talented and gracious and who seemed to know the rights and the wrongs and the absences of gray that made life so painful. Perhaps she would keep him safe from himself.

They married and moved to California for seminary. And within the first year of their marriage, she too “caught” him. Far away from home, with young children and expectations for a good life and with no help from a world that seemed not to know or speak of this “not right,” promises were made: never again would my father do this thing. Never again.

And the door was shut. Between them. Between them and this “thing”.

But not within my father. Jessica would not be denied, try as he might.

An Unnamed Guest

Pulpits were filled, churches served and family made until there were four children: three girls and a boy. The charm and intelligence that was the innate gift of this man were the catalyst. Paired with my mother, they were the American dream. Work with meaning, a growing prophetic voice and social relationships created a life so full and busy and rich.

And always, in my home, there was the presence of an unnamed guest: shame. The unspoken between my parents, the shame they each carried: my father's, for being this oddity and my mother's for perhaps feeling somehow at fault for it. That shame was in the very air I breathed. And I knew it not. I felt it, but could not name it.

I was 15 when my parents divorced. It was shocking to me and to the community that had written the script for the perfect family they thought we were. I cast about for reasons. Was it my fault? What could cause this seismic upheaval? I begged my mother for answers. She told me to talk to my father.

And I wondered: was he gay? Was that the reason for the silence about the divorce? So I asked him. He was in his cups at the time but what he did tell me was that he was a transvestite. It was a word I didn't much understand, but he pointed me toward the MASH TV show and Corporal Klinger on it and I couldn't make much sense of it because Corporal Klinger seemed to be parading around in woman trappings in order to convince people he was crazy and needed to be sent home and what was my father trying to convince his world they ought to do with him?

And what was I to do with him? With this man (was he a man, what was he and what would I call him?) who seemed to be spinning into chaos?

And he did. My father disintegrated. In his forties, he turned to look back on his life — as is fitting in midlife — and the incongruity between his real being and his public face began to exhaust his ability to act “as if.” He began to act out. He took to drink. He was kindly asked to leave his church. He tried to commit suicide. He remarried. He landed in treatment. He got asked to leave treatment. He stayed. He cracked open.

And resurrection commenced.

Welcoming the Stranger

Because now, now at last he could express the reality of his being and what he found was that people did not recoil in horror. Rather, they held him in their arms and opened the gates of their compassion and he began to see that there was not innate “sick” in him at all. There was, in fact, a woman who had been dying to be born, known and claimed. And her name was Jessica. And she was beautiful and fine and deserved to be heard and treasured.

He was not a transvestite. He came to know himself as transgender. A woman cloaked in a man's flesh. A woman who loved women. A woman who rebuilt her life grounded not in some nameless sense of sick, but upon a belief that she was God-crafted and God-kissed and God-blessed.

My father emerged from treatment a new creation. He was grateful to find the only work he could: he became a tech at the state hospital in town. He wiped bottoms and soothed the laments of residents there who were profoundly physically and mentally challenged. He who had preached the gospel from pulpits large and impressive was now literally kneeling at the feet of patients and experiencing the good news of an integrated life. Being able to buy a cheeseburger at Burger King was a big deal. He was financially broken. And he was whole.

He moved into a job in the chemical dependency unit at that state hospital. There, he worked with families seeking healing and understanding in the task that is recovery. He went to 12-step meetings. He found a community of the real.

What followed was ministry of the sort that changes lives. Jessica began to receive letters from other transgender people who were flailing about in life, seeking the assurance of grace and a hand to help them across into self-acceptance. He was pastoring a flock of people who knew the jarring presence of a gender identity that would not be stilled. No matter what the cost. The stories had to be told. And Jessica — she listened and coached and bore witness through the letters that came to and from her heart.

My Dis-ease

And for her daughter? Well, she did the same.

When I had a name for my sense of the below-the-surface stirring that was my father's daily bread, I felt dis-ease and relief. Finally, there was confirmation that I was not being hypersensitive. There was something with a name and maybe reason for the pain I watched wrack my father. I was sixteen at the time. Too young to be left with a drunken confession and no place to unpack it.

It led me many places, this reality in my life. I learn from it yet as I discern how it wove its way into my own story. The silence and questions, the awakening and awareness. What have been their costs and blessings? How do the anger and confusion, the shame and gratitude find voice in me?

My father had been a United Church of Christ minister. He was a gifted and prophetic and large-hearted minister who believed that Jesus taught grace and acceptance and a deucedly difficult way of life that led to fullness of being. There was great admiration for his gifts of provocation and challenge in the pulpit. He was eloquent and quirky and poetic and courageous. He believed in the power of the gospel and the power of community.

He preached for peace during the Vietnam war. He served a denomination willing to be cutting-edge regarding full inclusion of LGBT persons and he preached the joy of diversity. He was sniffing the wind always to find the beat-up and bedraggled folk who most needed to be held in grace while challenging the comfortable to see the fractures in our world.

He crashed mightily. His ministry ended in the ways that seminaries warn about and churches shudder from. And he became in his own mind and in the minds of a goodly number of his parishioners a pariah, this wounded woman/man. His good God knew he was in no shape to be leading a church as their pastor. But he was no less a human being in need of compassion. He was one of the broken he had devoted his ministry to. And while some did reach out, the denomination he had served for decades did not seem to know how to help and so he left.

And I watched this judging and unwillingness to reach toward her pain and I carried for a long time a deep resentment toward the church. The beauty of lived Christian community I had tasted as a cosseted child became the ugliness of judgment and shame and uncomfortable silences. I railed in my soul against the wounding power of communal condemnation.

I went to college as far away as I could go without paying out of state tuition. I was unable to fix anything, so I ran from it. I married a safe man and went about the adventures of having children and furthering my education and attending the busy of my own life-building as my father did the same.

He built a life grounded on sobriety, honesty and a willingness to share his woman-self with more and more people. Because the cost of denying his identity was too high.

My Own Transition

We didn't speak much about his woman-self until I began attending United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities at age 38. It was a three-hour commute from where I lived. It was a crazy thing to do while I had three children and many irons in the fire and it was crazier still because I had seen firsthand the way a community of faith can turn with teeth. I knew the inevitability of pain. I talked it over with my father. He shared his own concerns. But he understood and blessed me.

United Seminary was a midwife for so much in my life. It brought out my voice and taught me the wisdom of my heart. Through classes and discussions, I became aware of the vast silences that had taken

up so much soul space in my life. One of those silences had to do with my father and his journey. I signed up to take the Human Sexuality class offered in conjunction with United and the University of Minnesota. I was tired of the silence and increasingly aware of how much that silence affected my being. The class was co-taught by Anita Hill and Wilson Yates.

For my final project, I chose to interview my father. It was finally time to hear Jessica's story. I was forty years old. It had taken that long.

We sat in my father's home, the cabin that had been our family's for decades and she shared her story. I was able to see pictures of Jessica. I was able to hear about the shame and the deals and the opportunities she took advantage of to go to the University of Minnesota Human Sexuality mixers held for transgender people. I was able to hear the decision making process around gender reassignment surgery and the reasons she gave for not pursuing that route. I was able to hear how she knew herself to be a lesbian, since she was a same-gender-loving woman. I was able to hear her regrets about the hurts experienced by my mother and her church. I was able to hear her share from her heart the ways that she found amazing kinds of grace by being honest with her life. And oh-so- powerfully, she shared her sense that God had created her in love and with an artistry both challenging and beautiful. I gave voice to her in my final paper with a poem I wrote entitled "Jessica's Song."

My father Jessica died six months after our open heart sharing. She had a massive heart attack. Her heart broke partially, I believe, after being weakened by the decades of shame that had so long wrapped her. She had become the most real person I had ever met. I miss her desperately, because she knew so well how acceptance can gentle a person into their own skin. And she shared that acceptance lavishly with those she loved. I was such a one. At her funeral was a rainbow throng of people bearing witness to how she helped them see their own amazing grace. She did that for me.

Singing Jessica's Song

I am a United Methodist clergywoman. I didn't set out to fall in love with Methodism, but I did. I surely didn't set out to serve in a denomination that is in the trenches around issues of full inclusion. I wrestle often around the ethics of the many who are forced to serve in the closet and the many who have been silenced by a miserly definition of grace. I chafe and worse when I consider that by serving the Methodist movement, I serve a system that is hurtful to too many. I participate in an oppressive system. There is no dodging that truth.

So what I tell myself is that I can do perhaps more good working from the inside. I can organize and preach and teach and tell my story and I have seen that it matters. Hearts soften, communities become willing to look at their own fears and the gospel gets made flesh as we become able to see the spark of the Holy in each frightened and beautiful one of us.

Working in concert with others who struggle with the profanity of exclusion practiced all too often in communities of faith, I have organized conferences in Duluth (Opening our Doors, Opening our Hearts - now in its sixth year) and Voices United in Minneapolis-St Paul (two conferences thus far). Churches I serve have become Reconciling congregations wherein LGBT persons and their allies are amazed to discover acceptance and delight in being a part of the community.

At the first Voices United conference (co-sponsored by HRC) held at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist church in Minneapolis, we offered a play, Mrs. Man of God. The play is narrated by a man who is in a partnered relationship with a pastor within a denomination that will not allow same-gender loving persons to serve as ordained pastors. Before the play, the One Voice chorus of Minneapolis performed.

The chorus is made up of LGBT persons and their allies. There were people in that sanctuary singing with all they had about the beauty of themselves and their God. There were transgender people and gay people and lesbian people and bisexual people and my heart near broke at the beauty of it all because here was the promise made flesh. People too long shunned by the church were willing to share with the world the power of their belief in the beauty of the gospel and they were my people and my father's people and I prayed, please God, make us worthy of their witness.

The silence has cost too much. Jessica could not sing her song while she lived. But I can and I do.

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