

Emily. A Transit of Grace: A Theological Journey with my Transgender Child

I graduated from college in the early 90's, studying Philosophy and English Literature. I loved creating theories, weaving and finding my way through a paper. I didn't like the classes that were all about right or wrong answers, black and white, yes or no.

A few years later, I became a parent, and suddenly I was *desperate for* yes/no, right/wrong answers. I *wanted* a list of instructions on how to run my life and the lives of my children.

This desire for rules and regulations reared its head again a few years ago when my eldest child told me that they were transgender, not a girl, but a boy, not the daughter I thought I had, but my son. In that shell-shocked moment, I wanted a list of instructions, a list of do's and don'ts.

I speak here not for all parents of transgender children, nor for all Catholics. My account of my son's journey is unique, no less unique than any life's journey, This is how I came to understand.

Gender and sexuality have been growing topics of discourse worldwide, so there was a lot of information out there, but I also wanted a Catholic perspective to this situation. My faith has helped me in good times and bad - it's been a compass for me. When my son told me he was trans, I actually googled Catholic and Transgender. I wanted the answers, the formula. I didn't find it right away.

Now I see that the answers I was seeking and the direction I needed were ultimately there - in the form of encountering and bewilderment and the bridge they created to living the precepts of Catholic Social Teaching. Like Jacob in Genesis who woke up from a dream and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." (28:16) That's how I feel today, that some answers were there, I just didn't see them at the time.

Cardinal Walter Kaspar writes “The starting point for the doctrine of God,” is when Moses *encounters* God in the burning bush - this is the “I am who am” verse from Exodus 3:14. There is a difference however between the Hebrew translation (of the “am” - the verb “being”) and the Greek translation. The verb in Hebrew is much more dynamic than the Greek translation. In Greek, it’s “I am who am.” In the Hebrew translation, the relational aspect of God is more amplified “I am the one who is there.”

The answer that Yahweh gives to Moses thus conveys the meaning, “I am the one who is there for you, who is with you and by you.” Therefore, the Catholic doctrine about God is rooted in an *encounter* and the *relational*.

The prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed this relational message, and the message is enacted in stories involving solidarity, human dignity, and the common good. In the New Testament, Jesus disclosed these relational qualities in how he lived and interacted with others – often in radically inclusive and sometimes confounding ways. And the Catholic Church continues to carry this relational message in its present day precepts of Catholic Social Teaching, or CST.

Catholic Social Teaching tells us how to be *‘social’*, how to *relate* to one another, how to *care* for one another. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops writes that CST “is rooted in the soil of human communities.” It responds to cultural and societal conditions and draws nutrients from the Word of God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The Church’s social teaching is always living and active.” (#2421)

The Church sees the value of *living* solidarity, human dignity, the common good, the principles of CST, rather than just reading, writing, and talking about them. Pope Benedict XVI beautifully expounds on CST in two of his encyclicals - *Caritas in Veritate* and *Deus Caritas Est*. He writes, “CST *assembles into a unity* the fragments in which it is often found and *mediates it* within the constantly changing life patterns of the society of peoples and nations” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 9). CST addresses the political, economic, and cultural issues of the day through the light of the gospel, its aim is “to...contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28).

How do we *start living* CST? This is where encounter and bewilderment are necessary.

At the beginning of their senior year in high school, my eldest child asked to start seeing a therapist. Great idea I thought - crazy hard honors classes, discerning college, processing family of origin issues. We found someone highly recommended. A number of sessions in, my child invited me to come along to an appointment. They had a letter they wanted to read to me in the counselor's office.

We go, and the letter gets read out loud, "Mom, I'm a boy. I'm trans. I'm your son, not your daughter." The words were hanging in the air in the counselor's office. My first born was looking at me with these huge eyes.

My heart was pounding - I felt blindsided. In the space of 2 seconds, there are 80 thoughts that race through your brain. "What do you mean you're transgender? Where is this coming from? How do I tell people? What will you do about going to the bathroom at your high school? What will you do about college? Dorms? What does this mean about your physical body? I don't really want another son. I love having a daughter!" It was a tremendously uncomfortable moment to be in, to encounter.

And I was bewildered - *Bewildered* - from the roots 'be' (meaning, 'thoroughly') and 'wilder' (meaning 'to lead or go astray'). I felt thoroughly led astray. I did *not* see this coming. People have asked, "Did you think he was? Did you see signs?" No, I was totally unprepared.

Whether I was prepared or not, it didn't matter. I had to respond to my child, then drive home, do laundry, check work email, and pay bills.... This was real life, not some book or article. My child still looked and smelled the same; has a mole on their left hand that I *always* think is a smudge of chocolate; has ankles pop as they come down the steps, so I always know which kid it is even with my back to the stairs, and always sneezes not once but three times in a row. Bewildered as I heard, "I'm transgender" and then brought back to earth as we're leaving the therapist's office with, "what's for dinner?"

Thus began a prolonged period of encountering and bewilderment. I wasn't allowed to stay in the theoretical, the abstract, the principle - this was real life and it was confusing and hard. It was a type of desert experience in which I felt without a compass.

My child's counselor provided me some resources - the LGBTQ Center locally for example. There is a growing source of literature on people who are transgender, however, I admit, I was uncomfortable with all of it.

It all seemed so..... relative. Gender as a spectrum? I had a daughter, you know? How, I asked myself? How can it be that they grew within me and they were a GIRL? How? I saw it (at the time) as my child rejecting the miracle of their creation.

I had encountered so many 'new' things with this child. Caring for a newborn, immunizations, 7th grade math, acne, driving lessons, etc. To some extent, I was used to a posture of encountering the new as I lived life with this person. I therefore opened myself to encounter chest binders, testosterone shots, shaving beards, conversations about top surgery. Some of the encounters were easy - but I'll be honest, most were hard and bewildering.

I *now* see that period of bewildering encounters as a grace, because it was ultimately a portal for humility and subsequent growth. Theologian James Whitehead and developmental psychologist Evelyn Whitehead wrote an amazing book called *Fruitful Embraces* that has helped me so much. They write that "Bewilderment is an expectable disturbance in the journey of faith." (FE 142) They note stories in the Bible where many people felt bewildered (thoroughly led astray):

- Children of Israel, 40 years wandering (Exodus)
- Joseph, deserted by his brothers, (Genesis 37)
- David, hunted by King Saul, (1 Sam 24-27)
- Job, personal testings, (Book of Job)
- John the Baptist, desert dweller, (Luke 3)
- Jesus, 40 days in the desert, (Matthew 4, 1-11)
- Joseph and Mary, being told to move twice (Matthew 1:18-2:20)

People were led to amazing places, figuratively and literally, but only after going through bedeviling and bewildering times. The confusing time following the appointment in the

counselor's office was necessary, I think. If we are never, or never allow ourselves, to be bewildered, it means we have stayed too close to home, and doesn't result in growth or moving forward.

Like those figures in the Bible, I felt like God kept calling me into the unknown, however I felt really divided. I was uncomfortable with the idea of transgender people. I couldn't make it fit with my understanding at the time of male and female, the Genesis narrative, however my heart, my gut, my body were so tied up with this beautiful being, this being who was telling me their truth.

I wanted to have an open mind about the transgender topic, something that some believe goes against social norms. I started with the radical inclusivity and upside-downing of social mores found in the Gospels.

Jesus exemplified thinking outside the box through civil disobedience when the heads of grain are eaten on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23), subversive associations when he eats dinner with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15), and re-imagining religion by disobeying purity restrictions with the hemorrhaging woman (Lk 8:48).

Saint Joseph was also my inspiration at this time, because *he* was asked to do some confusing things involving his family. He is told to marry a woman who is bearing a child not his own (Mt. 1:18-25), then is told in a dream to move to a new country (Mt. 2:13), then later in another dream, told to move again. (Mt. 2:19-20). He was bewildered by God and still kept following God's call. Pope Francis states that Joseph was "constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God's presence and receptive to God's plans, and not simply his own."

Deep down, I believed that my child's desire to be whole 'was' holy. I therefore started asking, reading, and talking with others, including my child, about gender, a topic that I thought I knew about. It turns out that "what I *didn't* know" about gender, was a lot.

I found that there is *so much more to learn* about gender, so much more to learn about the incredible ways that we are formed. Experts in the fields of neuroscience, biology,

psychology, and more are making advancements in our knowledge of gender all the time. What we know today is very different than what we knew just 20 years ago.

- **There is a Genetic element of gender** //through chromosomal inheritance - a pair of XX chromosomes, a pair of XY chromosomes, or other variations that we're just now discovering.
- **There is a Physical element of gender** // found through primary and secondary sexual characteristics: like breasts, vagina, testicles, penis, uterus, ovaries. There are so many combinations of this - not just the diagrams we are taught.
- **There is a Brain element of gender** // functional structure of the brain that can run along gender lines, though this absolutely does not mean that there are male brains or female brains.

In the beginning of this journey with my child, I stumbled around the words found in Genesis that “male and female God created them.” (Gen 1:27). I loved my child, and I support my child, however, we're all born as either girls or boys, right? That is what the most recent document by the Congregation for Catholic Education offers. (*Male and Female He Created Them*, June 2019).

What I discovered is that the understanding of Genesis 1:27 can be enriched by the *reality* of contemporary experience and science. It's not accurate therefore to say 50% of people are “male” and 50% are “female.” Statistics gathered from births in the U.S have found that:

- There are around 2,000 intersex people born every year - these are people born with a combination of internal/external genitalia or organs - a person might possess both ovaries and a penis. (as many intersex people as redheads).
- There are also people who are born with XY chromosomes (the “male” pairing of chromosomes), but whose system is unable to take up testosterone in developing a penis and other male body parts.

- Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) - A person appears to be female but has no uterus, the breasts develop but there is no menstruation, and pregnancy is not possible.
- There are people who are not born with XX (the “female” pairing of the chromosome) *or* with XY (the “male” pairing of the chromosome), //1 out of 1,666

When you look at the total number of people born today whose bodies differ from “standard” male or female, it works out to roughly 1 out of every 100 people (ISNA stat).

With 7 billion people on the earth, these statistics indicate that there are millions of people that don’t fall into the “either/or” buckets of woman or man. Modern science and experience therefore allows us to affirm both that God created man and woman...*and*, that God created, and continues to create, much more.

“Male and female God created them” is nested within an awe inspiring panoply of creation in Genesis. Genesis 1:27 - Biblical scholars note it employs a *merismos*, a Greek word meaning a narrative device where something is described or referenced in its entirety. God created man all the way to woman. Not either/or, not a binary. Genesis 1:5 notes “God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day” , another merismos. From day all the way to night. From land all the way to sea. There were plants, fish, birds, “every living thing”.

Now four years since my child told me they are trans - I’ve read documents about gender, sexuality, and nature. I’ve read Biblical exegeses, medical journals, encyclicals, interviews, canon law, and autobiographies. I’ve had conversations with my son, other trans people, doctors, and therapists. I now see the gratuitous aspect of God’s creativity. I recognize that there are complexities of sexuality and gender, that there are myriad and miraculous ways that people can be “knit together.” (Psalm 139)

In citing scripture and biblical verses like Genesis, what is important is the *essence* of what Scripture is conveying.

Dei Verbum (11-13), the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, discussed how today's scientific and historical findings seem at times to contradict some statements in the Bible. The Council at Vatican II believed that scriptural statements need not be taken literally, because the bible does not set out to teach science or history. The use of sacred scripture is so "we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, (DV 13) (which cites St. John Chrysostom "In Genesis" 3,8 (Homily 17, 1): PG 53, 134).

As I was reading, talking with others, and listening to my child about his identity, a phrase from Psalm 139, verses 13-14 kept running through my head, words on my refrigerator magnet when the kids were babies - "(God, you) created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because *I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*")

I was privileged enough to feel this amazing being come to life in my body, come into being in the world, hold this miracle in my arms. They truly were wonderfully made. That verse from Psalm 139 offered guidance in the midst of my bewilderment about gender, that *essence, the gentle kindness*. The statistics reveal that God creates an infinite variety of humans and that sacred scripture is meant to again underscore, among other things, the gratuitous aspect of God's creativity. I was able to affirm that yes, this is my son. I was able to concretely affirm the CST (Catholic Social Teaching) principle of *his* human dignity.

I was able to get there only because I was so connected (literally and figuratively) to a transgender person. I diapered that little body, read stories to them, taught them to read, fed them their favorite baby food (carrots) until they turned a weird shade of orange, trimmed their teeny tiny fingernails, taught them to drive, to balance a checkbook, how to vote.

When my son told me that he was trans, I wasn't able to cross the river immediately and say, "great, you're trans, got it". I wish I had been able to, but the hard truth is that I wasn't. I stayed connected however with this amazing child while I encountered new

details about gender, was bewildered by new information, and finally arrived at the place of seeing, valuing, affirming his inherent human dignity as a man.

I was 'slow of heart' as Jesus says of his disciples (Lk 24:25) . I was slow to follow the instructions, which were to love, encounter, be bewildered, and thereby live into valuing the human dignity of my child, standing in solidarity with him, speaking up for the common good of all those marginalized including transgender people.

My journey with him was slow, hard, stumbling, relational work, and I wish I could have done it better. I wish I could have received his news - I am transgender, I am a boy, and immediately lived into affirming his human dignity as a man, standing in solidarity with him as he navigated the bureaucracies of his high school, advocating for a preferential option for him, a marginalized population, and on and on.

I needed the bridge of encountering and being bewildered. I needed to hear confusing stories - like how he just *couldn't* use the girls bathroom at school. I needed to be confused by his total disconnect and disassociation with his breasts.

It took me a long time before I could call him the name he wished to be called - Jamie. I didn't call him his birth name, but I couldn't quite say "Jamie". I said honey, love bug, sweet-pea, etc. He would look at me with a bit of sadness, with a bit of acceptance about where I was, but I could see it still hurt.

I slipped on pronouns all the time - I'd reference him to his little brother and I'd say, "She'll pick you up at 4." I'd see him look down - never obvious about it, but little cuts. My reaction to seeing him at his college after he'd been on testosterone for a few months, as his body looked and felt so different - difficult to see and hold the t-shaped man emerging from the slender girl I knew.

I needed to encounter his painful stories, and I needed to encounter his joy, his posture when he started wearing men's clothes, his smile, a smile that I didn't see for 18 years. I thought he was a happy kid, but now I look at pictures and can see that his smile was a

shadow of what it is today. That was the bridge I needed to get to the living the CST principles and living the Gospel message.

When he had top surgery - I was with him in the hospital, and I was emotional - I'd washed that little toddler's chest, and now parts of it were going to be taken away. But *Jamie* walked with *me*, *he* encountered *me* in those moments. At the hospital, he was the loving, courageous, encountering one who grabbed my hand and said, "Mom, thank you for this body. I'm not rejecting it, I'm doing something so that I'll finally love it the way that it should be loved. I'm looking forward to loving this body you gave me."

Though it took some time, and some crashing around, the path and the answers were there. The Catholic Church, the deep well of Catholic Social Teaching, had what I needed then and what I need today to embrace and totally support my transgender child.

Pope John Paul II, in his *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* lays out the "instructions" I looked for from the beginning. He writes "The theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and solving present-day problems in human society. There is the need for a radical *personal and social renewal* capable of ensuring justice, solidarity, honesty and openness. Certainly, there is a long and difficult road ahead; bringing about such a renewal will require enormous effort. We must not be seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person and the assurance that he gives us: *I am with you!* It is not therefore a matter of inventing a 'new programme'. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Love." (577)

My Catholic faith *had* some of those instructions I wanted when I became a mother, and *particularly* when my child said they were transgender. The "instructions" included a command to love, however the instructions also said that I had to encounter him (in good and hard ways), and be bewildered by the whole situation. The concepts of encountering and being bewildered were the bridge to living my way into the principles of solidarity, preferential option, human dignity and the common good, thereby walking the walk of the Gospel message.

My 'Transit of Grace' was a journey I could not have done without the gift of Grace. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, reminds his audience, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith---and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph.2:8).

The gift of Grace is necessary for me every step of the way. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is an apt message today – he's basically calling for unity in the midst of diversity and different relationships. It's a good reminder to us in addressing divisive issues today such as LGBTQ questions.

Sr. Joan Chittister writes "of what use is it to sit and talk about reality if we are not talking to people who think differently than we do, or can...chart the development the world needs?" Pope Benedict tells us to encounter even those "whom I do not like or even know." (*Deus Caritas Est, 18*)

The Church has a long history of eventually developing its stance on certain issues. Galileo was denounced as a heretic by the Church and jailed until his death for claiming that the earth moved around the sun. Popes considered slavery as justifiable in certain circumstances until well into the 19th century. And the death penalty was considered an acceptable form of punishment by the Church until quite recently. The Church eventually *developed* its stance on these issues in the face of real life stories, reflection, prayer, and not a little confusion and bewilderment.

The Church is in need of development in areas such as racism, poverty, LGBTQ issues, and clericalism, just to name a few. Where we as a Church should *not* take time however, is practicing loving kindness to transgender people all over the world. They are discriminated against, assaulted, and murdered. There should be no 'time for development' in this area. Real life continues to happen in the midst of theological and doctrinal discernment. We can be a part of that development if we make actionable, our words of love to one another while we're living and walking this path of life.

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium* writes "we are all in the same boat and headed to the same port! Let us ask for the grace to rejoice in the gifts of each, which belong to all." (EG 99)

Let's encounter, be bewildered, and let's keep talking with and loving one another as together, as we head our boat to the same port.