

The transfiguration of Larissa

When my parishioner returned to church, she seemed to have crossed a threshold that revealed her true self.

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by DrAfter123 / DigitalVision Vectors / Getty)

This dad, who came to Wee Worship with three young sons, was one of the most miserable people I've encountered at church. Wee Worship is a service that embraces the needs and gifts of very young children. In addition to looking glum and avoiding eye contact, the dad appeared to be overwhelmed and stressed to the max by the three boys. Conversation was forced and difficult.

I never met the boys' mother, a busy doctor. Although most of the parents at Wee Worship would chart themselves on the liberal/feminist end of the spectrum, some were secretly annoyed at this absent mother and blamed her for the wild behavior of the three boys. By some, I mean me.

When the dad and boys stopped coming for a number of months and I was unable to reach them, I was sorry, yet not as sorry as I might have been. Even Wee Worship has its limits on out-of-control behavior. Our flyers say “Squirmers welcome!” but these three tested the truth of that. They didn’t just squirm; they raced around the altar, once knocking down a lit candle, and they hid in the pulpit, all while their dad ignored them.

Their absence reduced my own stress, and then I was away for several weeks following a hip replacement. One day at physical therapy, I was waiting to sign in behind a woman who was chatting with the receptionist. As she turned around, I realized that the chatty woman was the dad. Or rather, a beaming, happy version of the person I’d known, who is actually a woman named Larissa.

Larissa looks you in the eye, loves to talk, and exudes a kind of buoyant radiance. Larissa has returned to Wee Worship, and the three boys are much calmer and appear happier too. Such dramatic parental transformations can be challenging for children, but in this case, they seem to be doing well—perhaps because Larissa is far more attentive to them than she was before. They still call her “Dad,” a word she says she’s fine with.

One of the other children in worship asked about it, and I explained that some people are really a girl even if they appear to be born as a boy or vice versa. They are happier that way, and we want them to be happy.

One of my granddaughter Mia’s favorite camp counselors is outwardly feminine-presenting and used to use she/her pronouns. Now they identify as he/they. My daughter accidentally misgendered him mid-conversation with four-year-old Mia. She was quick to correct her. “Mommy, [Name] is a he. They look like a girl but he told me they are a boy now and a he so that’s what you have to say!” No confusion at all. Kids just get it. Most of the children in Wee Worship were more interested in the donut holes somebody brought for a post-worship snack.

The best way I can describe the dramatic change in Larissa is transfiguration. Unlike some of the young trans people in our shelter, I have not seen her decked out in glitter, but even in conservative clothing, she dazzles. On the luminous mountaintop, Jesus crossed a threshold between heaven and earth to show us his true identity, and hasn’t Larissa crossed a threshold as well, to reveal her true self? In both cases, others paved the way. Jesus had Moses and Elijah. Here in New York, Larissa has

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, forebears who led the way of liberation at Stonewall and beyond.

Then we have Peter wanting to preserve the moment, and the people, in three little boxes, each one in their designated place on the mountaintop. But it's not Peter's call. When God's voice interrupts him, telling the disciples to listen to Jesus, they are overcome with fear. Why? Were they dizzy with mystery? Were they scared of what Jesus might require of them next?

February brings us to the height of Epiphany before leading us down into the valley on the Lenten road to Jerusalem and Golgotha. February also includes the commemoration of St. Ansgar. I once came upon a statue of Ansgar in Hamburg, Germany, a city to which he is said to have brought Christianity in the ninth century. Judging from the statue, Ansgar appears to have arrived in Hamburg carrying a perfectly structured, ready-made church in his arms. He is literally bringing the church to Hamburg, a fully formed church that he is going to plop down in the city.

Unfortunately, this model of church growth did not remain back in distant centuries. When we use the language of inviting someone to church, we might be communicating that the church is an already formed entity that we want new people to join and align themselves with, rather than a community that the Spirit continues to build anew. In my denomination, we say we want "new, young and diverse" people in church (a million of them!), but do we? The experience of many is that we want new, young, and diverse people who will fit nicely into unsafe structures previously set by older, usually White members. But transfiguration in the body of Christ comes through those who don't exactly fit into anyone's prefabricated dwelling place, by those who question, challenge, dream, wonder, dazzle, and transgress thresholds.

My trans siblings teach me about such a church, even as Christians have spilled their blood. They teach me about bravery, about listening to the voice of truth speaking belovedness, about rising up and walking on in splendor when they have every reason in the world to be afraid. I don't want them to join my church. I want to walk out the doors and follow them down the mountain to wherever Jesus leads. I wonder what Ansgar would make of it all.