

How do you hold together your trans identity and your life of faith?

## **Nine trans Christians tell their stories.**

First Person in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue



Design by Daniel Richardson. Photo © David De Lossy / Photodisc / Thinkstock.

My granny once told my grandpa to darn his own socks! This was a gender radical thing to do. She also rode motorcycles, and to many a baby she sang German

lullabies while they drifted off to sleep. She had two books in her house, not counting cookbooks (of which there weren't any). I found and read both of them as a curious child. A *Piano Favorites* primer, and a dusty dollar paperback by Roger Shinn called *The Sermon on the Mount: A Layman's Guide* (a bestseller in 1954).

I have no idea what Roger Shinn would have said about "transgender Americans." (That wasn't a phrase we had then.) But after my granny died, I grew up to be one. And an ordained minister, now working in the national office that regularly teaches Shinn's later work: the United Church of Christ *Statement of Faith*. In both works, Shinn cites the countercultural cost of discipleship. The context is international, not merely personal. Yet this idea—and some angels along with it—saved me from suicide and preserved my faith when I had to commit to life transition as a young adult, despite the judgment of everybody I knew.

I shouldn't say it was a solitary road. It turned out to be the opposite—I was accompanied by numerous trans people, risk-takers, and world-changers. That company exists today partly in the church community and partly not. I'm all too aware that part of me is welcome in the church and part not. Yet I'm living out my vow as an ordained minister on behalf of Jesus—who went outside (up on a mountain) to proclaim who the blessed people are.

Because Jesus went that far, I believe, all the people inside all the churches are included too. Then and now and in ages to come. Even while we work on our "isms." Racism, normalism, poor-people-don't-matter-ism, sexism, and militarism. Oh—and bathrooms. Of which my granny had one.

— **Malcolm Himschoot**, *United Church of Christ pastor who was featured in the 2005 documentary Call Me Malcolm, and author of "[Practices of Spirit for Genderqueer and Transgender Christians](#)"*

Early in life I was taught that God knows and loves everything and everyone, including me. My childhood congregation said next to nothing about sexuality. We were busy. We were engaged in the struggle for civil rights. There was no time to beat up on people for their sexuality. As a result, I didn't grow up with religious self-hatred: I felt that God was fine with my trans identity. But I quickly learned that most people were not. I held my identity as a secret between myself and God, for my own safety.

As I embarked on my call to ordained ministry I felt God would help me keep our secret for the rest of my life. That was not to be. When I came out as trans to my supervising pastor, I lost a position, an income, a vocation, my peers, friends, a church home, my reason for living, and almost my faith. I fell into a darkness that felt like something out of the Psalms: the depths, the pit, bowls of tears, the wilderness. It felt like death.

But God never let go. I came again into the light of day, ready to start my new life, even as I knew that I would never be separated from my old life. I would have to find a way to make sense of the two. I didn't have to go far to find that way. I found it in Jesus.

At the heart of the gospel is Christ's death and resurrection. In baptism a person becomes a part of Jesus' death and resurrection. I began to look at my transition as a baptismal story. I began to use the language of death and resurrection to talk about my life. Being trans and passing through transition helped me understand that death and resurrection is the way Christians move through the world. It is the pattern of our lives.

I began to see myself as an icon of resurrection. That led me to see all trans people as icons of resurrection. An icon should be treated gently, with respect and dignity. I'm learning daily that all of us are icons of death and resurrection in some way.

My trans identity has deepened and broadened my faith. However, my experience is far from universal. For many of my trans sisters and brothers the church is a painful place. It saddens me when I see my Christian sisters and brothers demonizing trans folk. Still, even when I look upon death I hope for resurrection.

— **Carla Robinson**, an Episcopal priest, who was featured in the 2012 documentary *Voices of Witness: Out of the Box*

Assigned female at birth, I did not find in my faith tradition good models for how to be female. Bodies are sacred, but consciously and unconsciously we teach that female bodies are dangerous and need to be hidden, and that women do not know themselves well enough to decide how to care for themselves. While that is our culture, that is not my faith. But disentangling faith from culture is hard.

In my first year as a pastor I realized I had been wanting an external authority to tell me to transition. The required psychological evaluation before seminary had shown what I always knew, that I am an “average hyperactive male.” I wanted a doctor to tell me to do something about it so I wouldn’t have to take responsibility for the inevitable conflict that might follow.

But we live out our faith in conflict, wrestling at the Jabbok. Most established faith communities, in my experience, are afraid of conflict. I was always welcome in church, but I was also always aware of being different, socially and personally. When I came out as bisexual in seminary, my gut reaction was that I would have to leave the church. Instead I found that God’s love is bigger than the church, the Creator is not finished with me, and the Spirit continues loving me into wholeness.

Part of me is welcome in the church and part is not.

Yet I walk with a limp, aware of the ways my cultural tradition is broken and keeps people broken and afraid. My roots in Augustinian anthropology mean that any thought of doing something for myself gets wrapped up in selfishness and shame. Luther wrestled with this constantly. But not to present myself honestly to the world is to deny the work of my Creator. I am not simply male, I am transmasculine, and that is important and holy. My faith gives me the freedom and strength to refuse assimilation.

Nobody know what our final wholeness will look like, feel like, or sound like. We are not even the same today as ten years ago. But the first creation myth in Genesis says we were created in the divine image. If God is limited to one way of being male and female, with no variation between or outside of that binary, then we lose the colors of the full spectrum and are left with black and white, no shades of gray. Our God transgresses boundaries. Jesus disregards purity segregations to infect us with shalom.

— **Andrew Tobias Nelson**, pastor at Christ Our Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Chatham, New York

I remember vividly how the church enabled my transition. On one of San Francisco’s sunny and windy days in June 1997, I marched in my first Gay Pride parade. I hadn’t yet come out publicly, and I was terrified. The parade danced, pranced, and strode

from the Civic Center, down Market Street to the Ferry Building on the shore of San Francisco Bay. I trotted past deep crowds on both sides of the street, mixing drag, leather, kink, every conceivable permutation of sex and gender. But I was lost. Sure, I had friends in TransGender San Francisco—but that was parties, not real life. I wondered whether I was about to step off a cliff, transitioning not into living as my true self, but rather into dying as a despised and humiliated fool who had compulsively thrown away a perfectly good life, career, and family.

The parade terminated where various organizations had set up booths to recruit members or sell products. There I found a table saying, “The Episcopal Church welcomes you!” I was aghast. Don’t all Christians hate us? Don’t they hate transsexuals especially? A welcome seemed too much to hope for. I am a cradle Episcopalian. My parents had homeschooled me when we lived in the Philippines, where they were missionaries when I was a young child. Could I find a home here, in the church?

The table was staffed by the late Bishop Otis Charles together with other gay men and lesbians from the Church of St. John the Evangelist in the Mission District near the Castro. I asked Bishop Charles, “Are transgender people welcome too?” He replied, “Yes.” I pressed, “Do you have any transgender members of your church?” He answered, speaking for the others, “No, we’ve never met one before.” Every Sunday for a year I drove from the Peninsula, where I lived, up to the city to attend church. I cried throughout every service for the first two months, from relief and gratitude that I had found a place of acceptance.

And then there was communion. There I stood before God. Was I really “Joan”? Or was I what my previous name would have implied—a cross-dressing, delusional impostor? This was the moment of truth. If I could take communion as Joan, then I really am Joan.

My first communion as Joan became the precise moment of my real transition. My public transition with a legal name and gender change followed a year later.

— **Joan Roughgarden**, *evolutionary biologist and ecologist, and author of Evolution’s Rainbow (University of California Press)*

When I first began taking testosterone nearly 20 years ago, the changes in my body were more rapid than I had anticipated. In fact, about six weeks into the process, I walked out of my office door and was startled to see a strange man standing across from me. A couple of seconds later I realized that the stranger was my own reflection in the mirrored windows. At a time when my outward appearance was transforming and people's perceptions of me were in flux, I had a sure sense that God knew exactly who I was and loved me as I am. This certainty gave me a solid sense of identity in the midst of change.

Raised in a devout, progressive Christian home that emphasized God's love rather than God's judgment, I never felt condemned by God. My transition from female to male was a response to God's calling to me to make this journey, and it has blessed me. My experiences of seeing the world, and being perceived, as both female and male have broadened my ability to relate to others.

My gender crossing has been a unifying of soul and body.

Three scripture passages sustain me and guide my ministry. The first is Isaiah 56, in which God overturns the prohibitions in Leviticus about those who fall outside of the gender binary. Instead God promises us an everlasting monument and a name better than sons and daughters. This passage speaks of the profound love that God has for all people, with a particular passion for those on the margins.

Second, Jesus' response to the question "Who is my neighbor?" with the parable of the Good Samaritan is profoundly applicable. Transgender people, particularly young women of color, face staggeringly high rates of violence. Add to this the rampant discrimination we face in housing, employment, education, and medical care (see the National Transgender Discrimination Survey for details), and it is clear that transgender people are often left bleeding—literally and figuratively—at the side of the road. Religious people often pass us by. Some actively work to block nondiscrimination and hate crime bills or to enact laws preventing our use of public spaces. Jesus' story, however, calls us to be healers rather than judges.

Finally, I am inspired by the beautiful story in Acts 8 where the apostle Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on the road and explains the story of Jesus. As they pass a pool of water, the eunuch asks what is to prevent him from being baptized. Philip doesn't even need to answer in words; he simply baptizes the eunuch. Baptism names us into the community of Christ. This passage reminds me to be

about the same work of creating a spiritual home without barriers for transgender people and all others.

— **Justin Tanis**, *United Church of Christ pastor and director of the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion at Pacific School of Religion*

A few years ago my Episcopal priest in Chicago gave a sermon on the journey of spirit as a unifying of the soul and the external persona. I realized with a jolt that my journey across genders was just that. “Aha,” I said to myself, “it’s the same as my gender crossing from 1995 to 1997.” (By the way, I prefer the term *gender crosser* to transsexual, which is clinical, scary and focused on sex, sex, sex. The Latinate term makes my journey sound like some indulged pleasuring, when in fact it was a spiritual/physical evolution.) For reasons that suddenly made sense during that sermon, this lifelong agnostic had become an enthusiastic member of the Episcopal Church. And so she has remained, a member in good standing of Grace Church’s women’s group and every year a little further on the Christian journey.

— **Deirdre Nansen McCloskey**, *economist and author of Crossing: A Memoir (University of Chicago Press)*

I transitioned to male because it was survival: in order to have any semblance of quality of life I needed to be myself. I transitioned knowing that it might cost me my family, my chance at ordination, and more. What I didn’t expect is that it would strengthen my faith in incredible ways.

I grew up in a faith tradition that was both emotional and anti-intellectual. We were warned to be careful what books we read, what preachers we listened to, and what we watched. We were warned that our faith was to be protected at all costs. As I left that tradition and explored my own intellect, I felt the emotion of my childhood faith slipping away. I could understand the historical context of scripture, grapple with church history, and defend my sexuality and gender against all naysayers. But I missed the personal relationship I used to have with God. I couldn’t see any way back to that place.

Then I transitioned. My physical transformation was a move toward wholeness that allowed me to access parts of myself I had never experienced before. I was able to understand myself as a person with a body, and that understanding shaped how I read scripture. I saw how bodily the Christian faith was—from Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones to Jesus’ resurrection (with a body still bearing scars) to the numerous stories of meals shared, bodies healed, and of course the emphasis on resurrection.

This emphasis on the body allowed me to see myself in scripture. I saw my complicated and complex body as a part of the biblical narrative. That entry point gave me a way to combine my intellectual pursuit with my own emotional story. It gave me a faith that was all-encompassing. For the first time I was allowed to be both smart and emotionally connected. I was allowed to understand the historical and the personal.

My transition has allowed me to find wholeness not only in my physical form but also in my faith. When Jesus said that he came to give us abundant life, I believe he was talking about a wholeness of body and soul, of mind and emotion, of past and present. A wholeness that allows us to approach life and faith as intertwined in beautiful ways. This was a gift that I never expected.

— **Shannon T. L. Kearns**, *theologian and priest in the Apostolic Catholic Church of America*

When I was born, my doctor took a look between my legs and found what he determined to be the indicator of my gender identity. My doctor would have been right 98 percent of the time. I am one of the 2 percent of people who are certain that the doctor made a mistake, not God.

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:13–14, NIV). God made me in God’s image. I am the person God created me to be. I had to endure years of fighting my true identity in order to be broken and accept God’s will. I found peace when I gave up the fight to be the person everyone else wanted me to be and instead became the person God wants me to be.

Scripture adheres to a strict concept of male and female—the binary gender system. There are no examples in the Bible of people who easily translate into the modern



conception of transgender identity. Eunuchs are mentioned as violating the gender binary, but the idea of eunuchs exemplifying transgender identity is inaccurate on many levels. They identified as male because there were no other options available to them. Many of them were castrated so they could serve a particular purpose in the ancient world, but some simply lived a life of celibacy or were unable to impregnate a female. This reality put into question their status as a “complete male,” but they still retained their identity as male. It’s safe to say that eunuchs did not identify as transgender because the concept was beyond their imagination.

Yet I identify with the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8—a person of color, a person not of the dominant culture, and a person who does not fit into the binary gender system. I see the world through the eyes of this eunuch. I, too, believe that Jesus Christ suffered, died, and rose from the dead so I may have eternal life in his kingdom. I have been baptized and am a recipient of God’s promises. I am a transgender Latina, and I have been recreated, justified, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

— **Nicole M. Garcia**, *candidate for ordained ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

A convert who chose Christianity at the age of 18, I framed my identity in terms learned from the Bible and Christian community. After seminary my doctoral work focused on how Christians biblically and theologically have understood being a woman. The earliest Christians expressed a radically grace-inspired equality. God seemed to scoff at humans’ self-important assumptions—most powerfully in God’s answer to Job, when God declares he has a womb (Job 38:29). Jesus too was unconfined by human gender assumptions, comparing himself to a mother hen.

But Paul’s repeated exhortations to faithful Christians that we must be mindful of “the weaker brethren” convicted me. I preached the gospel of freedom and equality, but as a person unable to conform (even medically) to the female label assigned to me at birth, I shut myself down. I underwent reparative therapies (hormones, psychiatric medication, and counseling) for three decades. I tried to pass as the woman I was told I should be in order not to upset my “weaker brethren” in Christ, even when I was physically dying from the side effects. I was willing to do so for the sake of Christian unity. Eventually I made out my will, took a leave of absence from

work, hosted a final visit with my parents, and stopped psychiatric medications. I wanted to face my last days sober, at peace with others.

My physical transformation was a move toward wholeness.

Then a friend suggested that I try praying in a new way, giving God thanks for being exactly as I am, whatever that might be. For decades I had begged God to take away my “thorn in the flesh,” the failure to conform to my birth gender. Now I stopped wrestling with God. I surrendered, and the words of Psalm 139 flooded my mind: “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Powerless in the face of God’s creativity, I thanked God for my being whatever I am—even if I myself don’t understand it.

Since coming out I’ve had to practice loving people who treat me as enemy. I’ve been blindsided by the violent hatred and indifference that other Christians have directed toward me, my children, and my friends. At the same time, a new community of the faithful came alongside me and upheld me. Trans people, intersex people, and gay and lesbian people have been family to me and my children. They have visited us when we were sick, brought us food, shared words of spiritual encouragement, and even prayed for those persecuting us in our moments of bitterness, fatigue, and despair. Like the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with her tears and precious oil, those who have been cast out truly love much and help me to do the same.

— **Heath Adam Ackley**, *former theology professor and minister in the Church of the Brethren, now training director for a suicide prevention line for transgender people*

*A version of this article appears in the January 18 print edition under the title “Trans identity and the life of faith.”*