

11-2018

Beyond Binary Gender Identities

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Repository Citation

Dunkerly-Bean, Judith and Ross, Camden, "Beyond Binary Gender Identities" (2018). *Teaching & Learning Faculty Publications*. 75.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning_fac_pubs/75

Original Publication Citation

Dunkerly-Bean, J., & Ross, C. (2018). Beyond binary gender identities. *English Journal*, 108(2), 95-97.

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BEYOND BINARY GENDER IDENTITIES

sj MILLER, Column Editor

Judith Dunkerly-Bean and Camden Ross—parent and child—share their perspectives on how Camden, who is transgender, navigates a duplicitous existence in a Christian private school.

Not the Girl Everyone Sees: A Transgender Teen's Experiences in a Faith-Based School

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I am he. I am him, I am her worst nightmare. I am he. That is how I identify. He is how you would describe me to your friends. He is the pronoun you would use in a sentence about me. I am he. I am him. I destroyed her, sad but true. I am no longer her. She is no longer me. She has been dead for quite a while but she doesn't seem to realize that because she is what I hear most of the time. She is a word that hurts me because I am no longer her. And she is not how I identify. I am him. I am.

—SKYLAR COGSWELL-SHEARS

The poem above, titled “I Am He,” by Skylar Cogswell-Shears (27) speaks to the figurative death and rebirth that occur when a transgender teen begins

re-presenting themselves to the world. sj Miller writes, “Naming one’s identity is an inherently embodied principle of gender identity self-determination, in which each individual is the ultimate authority on their own gender identity” (8). Yet, when naming one’s identity takes place within the context of a faith-based school, personal authority may be usurped by doctrine. When he was twelve, my son Camden (nicknamed Cam) began attending a faith-based school. He is now fourteen and identifies as trans*. However, to remain at the school means to continue to conform to the gender assigned to him at birth (female). **I am his mother. I am his ally.**

The statistics on transgender and gender nonconforming student experiences in schools are sobering. There is a paucity of research conducted in parochial school settings (Librio et al.). However, the latest data available from the organization GLSEN (pronounced “glisten”) indicate that 75 percent of the more than 150,000 transgender students in middle school and high school in the United States felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

Over 85 percent heard derogatory speech toward transgender individuals specifically. Seventy percent avoided using the bathroom because they felt unsafe. School policies prevented over half of transgender students from using their preferred pronouns, while 60 percent of transgender students had to use the bathroom/locker room that corresponded with the sex assigned to them at birth (GLSEN 3).

Moreover, transgender and gender expansive teens are more likely to suffer from depression, poor education outcomes, and face a greater risk of self-harm and suicide (GLSEN 5). As a mother, it is difficult for me not to see my child as the face of these statistics. After all, the tears undoubtedly shed by the teens behind those numbers have been shed by my own. The fear and anxiety of those children are the frequent companions of my own. **I fear for these students. I embody anxiety.**

Cam was just beginning to hint at questions about his gender identity when I enrolled him in a Christian private school. However, it was about two years before he identified fully as a trans*

individual—at least at home. The school holds that all forms of LGBTQIA+ identity are “not of God” and are reason for expulsion. Yet, we have chosen to risk this because of the support provided by a few friends (some of whom are also gender expansive or questioning). However, this means a duplicitous existence where everyday utterances and encounters are mediated by fear of discovery. **We struggle. We forge on.**

Before continuing with our story, we acknowledge that there is a spectrum of response to transgender and gender nonconforming individuals across religious denominations. Yet, research demonstrates that those that promote hostile messaging can be sources of both direct and indirect victimization for LGBTQIA+ students, especially those who identify as trans* (Newman et al.). However, it is beyond the scope of this column to engage in religious or legal debates surrounding the “right” to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ students based on hermeneutical interpretations of biblical texts. Instead, we offer Cam’s story about how he questioned his gender and sexuality in a space where such questions live. **Where he must whisper. Where silence hurts.**

IN CAM’S WORDS . . .

I first started at Anchor Beach Christian School halfway through my sixth-grade year. I had switched schools after being bullied at a previous school. When I was in sixth grade, I had started

to question my sexuality (at that point I just felt that I was a butch bisexual girl) although I wasn’t positive that I was bi. I thought that maybe if I dated a boy the feelings would just go away. Surprise, surprise! They didn’t. So then came the summer going into seventh grade. I cut eleven-and-a-half inches of my hair off, and at the time I did it just because I said I was tired of always having it tangled, but looking back, I think it was more about not being comfortable being perceived as female. **I was uncomfortable. I was not female.**

The main issue was that I couldn’t come out. If I did then I could be kicked out of school for being “immoral.” This was painful. I was forced to hide my true self.

In seventh grade, I was still confused about who I was, but I made friends with a girl, Charlie, who was in tenth grade. We talked for a while and we became really close. I had tested the water by asking what she thought about Jazz Jennings, a transgender teen with a popular TV show, and her response was overwhelmingly positive. I slowly started to warm up and open up to her about how I was feeling. **We both were honest. We had each other.** By the time I began eighth grade, I knew that I wasn’t female but I also didn’t feel fully male. At that point I identified myself as nonbinary. By October 2017, I had finally figured out


that I was transgender. The main issue with that was that I couldn’t come out. If I did then I could be kicked out of school for being “immoral.” **This was painful. I was forced to hide my true self.**

It gets really hard for me sometimes because my teachers don’t know about me being trans*. For example, my science teacher will say things like, “Good morning, Ms. Cami!” or she refers to me as “ma’am” or “daughter.” When this happens, I have to physically stop myself from cringing. And it’s kinda weird because it almost feels like a physical pain in my chest. For example, in April, two of the boys in my class tried to educate me about “the homosexual agenda” and how “Jesus hates the choices they’re making.” They don’t listen to the various studies I’ve shown them that being LGBTQIA+ is not a choice, but that you’re born that way. They just say, “those studies were done by secular, God-hating doctors.” **I am not seen as I want to be. I am misrecognized.**

The only reason I stay there is because Charlie means so much to me. She graduates next year anyway, so after that there’s really not too much keeping me there anymore. Even if I wanted to stay and graduate from there, it’s just going to get harder and harder. I am now taking testosterone, and it is just going to keep changing my appearance until it becomes blatantly clear that I’m something other than the “girl” the whole school sees. **What then? What then?**

PROMISE AND POSSIBILITIES

Some readers might question the wisdom of having Cam stay in this school, given the risks involved. I admit to my own doubts. However, recent scholarship in Canada (where the government funds Catholic schools in three provinces) details proactive steps faith-based schools have taken to be more inclusive of their LGBTQIA+ students (see Libro et al.). Similarly, scholars in the United States have called for religious schools to recognize that the discrimination directed at LGBTQIA+ youth is antithetical to Christian ethics of justice (Joldersma). These examples may be a way forward for schools like Cam's.

His story is just one of many, but we hope that it provides an opportunity for reflection and needed advocacy for students with dynamic gender identities who need our support. **We are accountable to them. We are accountable to each other.** 

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