

SUMMER  
2016

# Families

WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

STORY FOR ALL AGES



## Gender on the Agenda

The Families pages  
are adapted from  
Tapestry of Faith  
lifespan faith  
development  
programs.

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## What's in a Name?

**When do you feel most like yourself? Is it when you are doing something special? When you wear your favorite clothes?**

**W**e know a child who feels most like himself when he sings silly songs with friends, when he plays with Legos in his bedroom, and when people call him by his real name, Ben.

It feels good to be called by your own name. It feels especially good if you were given a different name, as a baby, that wasn't right for you. When our friend Ben was born, the doctor took a look at the baby's body and said, "It's a girl!" because Ben's genitals looked like those of most girls. When Ann and Jim adopted Ben, they named him Marissa, because they also thought Ben was a girl.

Over the next few years, Ann and Jim noticed that their daughter acted more like they would expect a son to act, for example, using make-up to look like a fierce warrior and pretending to be male characters when playing with friends. "Handsome" brought a smile, but "pretty" was insulting. In kindergarten,

the child's feelings were hurt when a teacher said to use a pink "girl's folder" instead of a blue "boy's folder."

Between kindergarten and first grade, Ben told his parents, "I want to be called Ben, and I am a boy." He had named himself Benjamin James, after his father. He did not want the name "Marissa." He was ready to live 24/7 as the boy he had always been.

A word for this process is *transition*, which means to change from the gender label you received at birth—usually boy or girl—to a gender identity that is really you. Transition can mean a new name, a different wardrobe or hairstyle, and other ways of letting people know the gender you are. Ann and Jim were ready to assist their child's transition. But, the transition would be news to people who knew Ben as "Marissa."

To express himself as a boy made Ben a much happier child than his parents had

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ever seen! But, there were challenges at Ben's old school. "The school nurse would not let me use the nurse's bathroom, so I had to use the girl's bathroom, and I felt sad," Ben said. It was a struggle to get some classmates who knew him as Marissa to use his real name.

But the Elder family also found love and support. From the moment the family met Rev. Bruce Beisner, his husband Jim, and others at the Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church in Houston, Texas, they felt welcome. When Bob Handy learned that Ben didn't have a grandfather, he said, "I'm adopting you. You can call me Poppy." Ben was the first transgender person to be part of the congregation. Since getting to know Ben, the congregation has become active in the fight for transgender rights. And everyone there calls Ben by his real name.

The congregation understands: Ben's right to live as the gender he knows he is, inside, is an example of our UU First Principle: the inherent worth and dignity of every person. With the support of their faith community, the Elders have stood up for transgender people's civil rights in Houston and traveled as far as Washington, DC, where Ben posed for photos with President Obama and got a warm hug from Vice President Biden.

Ben says the most important thing parents of other transgender children can do is to be supportive. Because his parents have accepted his transition, Ben, now 10, lives as the boy he has always been. He wears clothes like the clothes other boys wear. He enjoys the same activities they do. He wants people to know he's just a "regular boy."

At his UU congregation, Ben takes an Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education program with his friends. The subject matter can sometimes feel awkward, as the group talks about terms like "gender identity," "genitals," and "transgender." But Ben says he enjoys learning new things.

- What questions do you have now, after reading Ben's story?
- Where can you go for answers?

## EXPLORING TOGETHER



When a baby is born, often the first question we ask is, "Is it a boy or a girl?" The words "girl" and "boy" refer to gender as well as sex. But, gender is an aspect of our personality, or, our spirit, while our sex is based on how our body is made. For some of us, our gender differs from our biological sex. Some of us think of ourselves as neither a girl nor a boy.

*What words might you use to describe your gender?*



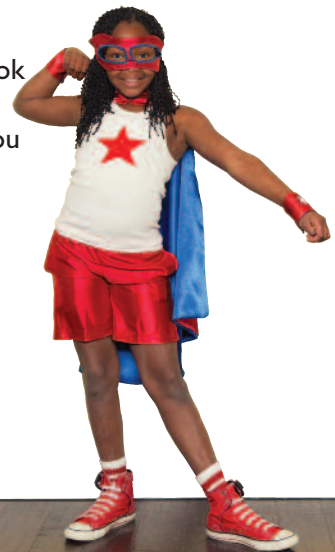
### Use Your Imagination

You wake up tomorrow morning and you look the same, but, you have a different gender. What might be different in your life? How you dress? Your favorite color or game? Your dreams for when you are grown?

Would your parents or friends treat you differently?

Would you be basically the same person?

*List some things you do now that you would still do tomorrow if your gender were different.*



### Beware of the Binary! Express Your Gender!

When Ben Elder transitioned, his new name, hairstyle, and clothes helped others to understand the real Ben. Our appearance, behavior, and personal preferences can be part of our gender expression—the ways we show masculinity, femininity, both, or neither.

What do you think about gender expression? Are there things you don't wear, do, or say because of your gender? What would happen if you wore, did, or said them anyway?

*"If everybody is different, how could there be only two kinds of people?"*

From the book, *Sex Is A Funny Word*

As Unitarian Universalists, we try to accept one another and keep on learning together, and there is always more to learn about gender! Many people believe there are only two categories: male and female. This is called binary, or "either/or" thinking. But, binary thinking takes away people's right to identify as any gender other than those two options.



### Noah, age 8, drew this self-portrait.

What does it tell you? What kind of a kid is Noah?

Try your own self-portrait. Have fun drawing in any style you want. When you are done, pretend you are someone who does not know you, and look at the drawing. What gender is the person in the drawing? How can you tell? Does it matter?

## A Day without Pronouns!

When we say “She drew that herself” or “He lives on my street” instead of referring to someone by name, we are using PRONOUNS. In English, we have different pronouns for females and males. But these pronouns do not work for everyone. Using a pronoun that doesn’t fit someone’s gender can hurt their feelings or make them feel invisible.

We can learn to use pronouns carefully to show that we respect everyone. We can say “they” instead of “he” or “she” or, use a new-ish English word, “zee,” to refer to anyone of any gender. When we say “zee,” we avoid putting a gender label on anyone.

Try this challenge with your family: For one day, use NO PRONOUNS. Always use the person’s name instead. For example, instead of, “I talked with Tyler and he said he would set the table,” say, “I talked with Tyler and Tyler said Tyler would set the table.” It’s awkward at first, but once you get the hang of it, you have a great way to honor every person, whoever they are, without assuming their gender.

zee



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### Don’t Dress Your Cat in an Apron

by Dan Greenburg

Don’t dress your cat in an apron  
 Just ‘cause he’s learning to bake.  
 Don’t put your horse in a nightgown  
 Just ‘cause he can’t stay awake.  
 Don’t dress your snake in a muu-muu  
 Just ‘cause he’s off on a cruise.  
 Don’t dress your whale in galoshes  
 If she really prefers overshoes.  
 A person should wear what he wants to  
 And not just what other folks say.  
 A person should do what she likes to—  
 A person’s a person that way.

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Although it starts out silly, this poem from 1972 makes a serious point: We ought not to force choices on others!

Yet, the poem uses “gender binary” language. All of the animals and people are either a “she” or a “he.” In 1972, to include BOTH “he” and “she” seemed like a good way to include everybody. Today, we know more about gender identities.

- Try to read this poem without using binary pronouns.
- Think of a poem you know. Are “he” and “she” used? Who is left out?



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# The Son He Never Had

by Melanie Davis

I am one of three daughters of Unitarian Universalist parents who encouraged us to play sports, speak our minds, and be leaders. They taught us we could do anything we wanted to do. To me, it seemed natural to spend time with Dad in his garage workshop. It had the earthy smell of freshly cut wood and was filled with shelves of adhesives, plumb bobs, hammers, hand saws, drills and bits, nuts and bolts, and nails of every size. The workshop had a table saw, a drill press, a lathe, and a huge vacuum to suck up sawdust.

I learned to use all of the tools. Some had been my grandfather's and great-grandfather's. I built a dog house, a dulcimer, and a cage for my pet ducklings.

Dad knew I was game to fix anything, so when a hummingbird froze to death by our front door, he asked whether I wanted to preserve it. "Sure!" I said. The next

day we bought supplies and a book on taxidermy. The finished product wasn't pretty, but we displayed it under glass and proceeded to stuff a few more birds that died after flying into our picture windows.

I started to describe myself as "the son my dad never had," because, despite my parents' teaching me I could be and do anything, I grew up in a world that said girls shouldn't get dirty, do woodworking, or stuff dead birds.

One day, another man told Dad, "Daughters are great, but you're not really a father until you have sons." My father was furious.

I never called myself "the son my dad never had" after that. I realized it limited me and implied, incorrectly, that Dad would have preferred sons. The truth was that I was one of three daughters he had, and he couldn't have been happier or prouder to be our father.



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- **What gender limitations or permissions were given to you as a child?**
- **Recall a time you may have crossed a gender-related boundary and an adult disapproved. How did that feel?**
- **Are you inadvertently giving messages that assume a child's gender or limit their gender expression? What gender-related expectations do you communicate to the children in your care?**

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## FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

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**Editor:** Susan Dana Lawrence

**Contributors:**  
Jessica York  
Melanie Davis

**Graphic Design:** Ann Casady

## FIND OUT MORE

■ Introduce children to gender identity through stories of gender non-conforming picture book characters as well as the lives of real young people. Jazz Jennings, now a teenager, co-authored the illustrated book, *I Am Jazz*, for children (K-5) and shares interviews and videos on the YouTube channel "jazzmergirl." *About Chris*, by Unitarian Universalist Nina Benedetto, uses colorful illustrations to affirm the dignity and self-worth of a child who knows he is a boy although his body is female.

■ *The Transgender Child* by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper (Cleis Press, 2008) is a comprehensive guide for families raising children who "step outside of the pink or blue box." Brill is the founder of Gender Spectrum ([www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)).

■ Families with gender variant and transgender children find support through local PFLAG chapters. The Facebook pages of Parents of Transgender Children and Parenting Transgender Children can help families to meet in person. For book recommendations, local resources, and family support group information, visit the websites of conferences such as Philadelphia Transgender Health Conference; Gender Spectrum (East and West); Gender Odyssey (Seattle, WA) and Gender Infinity (Houston, TX).

■ These pages include material from the forthcoming second edition of *Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education for Grades 4-6*.