

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

What are you, and What am I?

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A brilliant, theologian friend, and I sat knee to knee at the edge of Ray's and my pool, with our feet in the water, talking about the significance of "identity." I suggested that our various identities prevent us from ever achieving full awareness of what we are, and how we are related to all other living things. As long as we cling to an identity, we will never be able to transcend the limitations of our human experiences.

And yet, I am constantly pinning other people down with questions about their identity, none more dramatically than with my search for "stars." As part of the Stonewall National Museum & Archive's opening exhibition on 11/11/11, I am asking well-known gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people to donate a photograph of themselves and an iconic artifact that they feel best capture what they are to the public. For example, Billie Jean King might send a photo of her historic tennis match against "male chauvinist," Bobby Riggs, and the signed racket from the game. Each star gets one chance to represent himself or herself to all future generations with just one photo and artifact. What do you think they will be? What is their identity? What are they, and what do they want us to think about them?

A few days ago, I got an e-mail from a fellow early writer in the gay civil rights movement who was astonished by the statement of a transsexual woman that she cared nothing for gay and transgender politics. She wanted to be left alone to live her life as a woman. "Go away. I don't identify as transgender." What is she, then?

The Pope recently declared that married Anglican (Episcopal) clergy are welcome into the Roman Catholic priesthood, wife and all. In the past, countless thousands of men, women, and children died in horrible wars between the two Churches over the issue of identity. Now, these ordained Episcopalians, who oppose having gay and female clergy, easily change their identity to Roman Catholic. What are they?

Major General John Campbell has announced that American troops are withdrawing from the formerly important Pech Valley, where 103 American soldiers died, and far more were seriously wounded, fighting for piles of rocks in a remote region of the Kunan Province of Afghanistan that is no longer significant. If they had the chance, what might the deceased, twenty-year-old GIs say was their identities - "soldier," "departed spouse," or "patriotic American"?

My theologian friend, who is an international expert on world religions, told me of an exercise he once went through with a group of educators, led by a rabbi. They were asked to write down a single statement of how they identified themselves. Once they did so, the rabbi had them do it again and again, until they had twenty separate statements of self-identification. Then, they were asked to look through the twenty pages, and cut them down to ten, then to five, and then to two. With the two remaining sheets of paper, each person was told to pick the identity that most represented him or her.

The rabbi admitted that, for him, the word "rabbi" was one of the first identities to go. My friend stayed with the word "educator" for himself, but he was most impressed with the response of another person who identified as a "spiritual being."

Were I to do the same "identity" exercise, the word "gay" would certainly last until nearly the end, easily trumping "male," "writer," "speaker," and "spouse." But if "gay" was the very last word I had left to describe myself, I wouldn't be very happy. I am more than "gay," despite having spent my life defining, defending, and celebrating it in front of heterosexual people throughout the world. Like many others, I have given up a great deal to name myself "gay." But I don't want to die thinking that being gay is the most important identity I had in my life. I am much more than that. I really do like the choice of "spiritual being."

For Christmas, a friend gave me a session with the intuitive Cynthia Segal. She asked me what I sought, and I replied that I wanted to tap my healing energy more effectively. When I die, I told her, I want to know that I will flow back into the universal life force, the Tao, God, or whatever one chooses to call it, as pure a source of energy as I can possibly be. Cynthia told me what I knew to be true. Our thoughts create our feelings. Our feelings block our flow of energy. If I want to die as pure spiritual energy, I need to let go of all of the dramas in my life. Dramas create negative energy. Negative energy clogs the pipes.

In the past few weeks, this conversation has been shared by Ray and me with many of our friends. All dramas are based in our egos, and all of our egos are based in our multiple identities -- national, religious, family, gender, sexual orientation, and any other notions of difference that prevent us from being one with each other. So, what are you, and what am I?

Now, it won't help me to have every famous gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person tell me that they want to be known at the Stonewall Museum exhibition for being a spiritual person, and that their photo is blank. There are times when some identities are useful, such as when they help us make people feel less isolated or less afraid. Perhaps we are stuck with some identities just to function in our daily lives as theologians, rabbis, priests, and gay educators, but can't we simultaneously be aware that these identities are all false and fundamentally dangerous because they separate us from one another?

I won't live to see the day when trillions of dollars, and billions of lives, aren't wasted in battles over identities, such as being Muslim, or American, or "legitimately married," but perhaps with more and more frequency, we're going to encounter people who say to us, "Leave me alone. I don't want to engage in politics. I'm simply what I am."