

“Beyond the Binary: It Isn’t Simple”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

April 24, 2022

What comes to your mind when I say, “red pen”?
Close your eyes, and let’s try again: red pen.

How many of you thought of school papers, blue books, math tests, or English compositions?

I know I did. It may be a cultural or age thing, but in my generation, at least, teachers graded papers using red pen or pencil. I can still see the thick Bic felt tip pen writing of Mrs. Holton, my fifth-grade teacher. So too can I see the thinner ball point pen marks of my seventh-grade math teacher, with the grade circled at the top.

These are pleasant memories, and they’re not. They are pleasant because I loved school; it was a haven. It was not pleasant because every red mark indicated a mistake, something I should have known or could have done better. I was taught that, by and large, there was a right answer and a wrong answer. Even in classes allegedly designed to teach poetry, creative writing, or critical thinking, there were still boundaries on the road of academia. Most of us figured out those boundaries and dared not veer too far over the lines.

This encultured belief I held of right and wrong led me to seek approval, learn how to play the game of whatever the situation, and quiet many parts of myself, including the most audacious, bold, and vulnerable parts.

Along with right and wrong came societal teachings about good and bad. I knew early what it meant to be a good girl and what behavior was appropriate as it pertained to my sex and gender identity. This binary way of thinking and interacting with life went far beyond gender and grading of papers. It was integral to my world view as a cis gendered white American female of European descent.

There were exceptions, of course, including in my Unitarian Universalist religion where women were clergy, diversity was valued, and theological differences were welcome.

Still, binary thinking was, and is, everywhere. It is integrated into ideas and judgments about relationships, opinions, and people.

Binary thinking is where you have two opinions

and one is right and the other is wrong, with little or no room for gray, for spectrums, for complexity. There is no middle ground unless, of course, you are sure the middle ground *is* the only answer, thereby sequestering people who disagree. Yes, it can become a bit of a mind-bending exercise.

I’m not sure humans can exist without some degree of binary thinking, and I don’t know if that’s even the goal. The goals are to be aware of this tendency, have an openness to difference of opinion, and experience and seek to learn other’s perspectives.

Let’s take a moment to think about common binaries.

Sex:	male	female
Always	or	Never
Relationships:	coupled	single
Spiritual	or	Religious
Social justice	or	Spirituality

And then we have the irrational but nonetheless powerful standards of

Perfect	or	Broken
Able bodied	or	Disabled

There are endless examples, and there are examples of things we do understand as being more complex. We recognize homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual. Yet even there are great variances within the categories. The old binary of nature or nurture has turned out to be untrue. Instead, we understand that it is the interaction of nature and nurture that influences people.

Singer-songwriter, opera singer, and author CN Lester writes that “tackling binaries isn’t an academic exercise, but something that cuts to the heart of who we are, as individuals and as societies.”¹

The binary is what we default to if we are not conscious. It also where we go when we are threatened, stressed, or simply tired. This is

¹ Alex Barker and Meg-John Iantaffi, *Life Isn't Binary* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020), Prologue.

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understandable. We want to know an answer, have things make sense. The world is so overwhelming at times. Change is so rapid. Can't some things just stay the same? "I prefer to understand things as they have always been," we say to ourselves.

In his book *Think Again*, organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant explains the binary bias as "a basic human tendency to seek clarity and closure by simplifying a complex continuum into two categories."²

Grant writes about how changing long-held beliefs feels scary. We want to hold on to what we know. Changing an opinion or decision can feel like changing our self-identity. "We favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt, and we let our beliefs get brittle long before our bones."³

He advocates that one of the most important skills of our times is the ability to relearn, to reconsider what we originally learned or think is true, and be open to thinking differently. "[I]ntelligence is traditionally viewed as the ability to think and learn. Yet in a turbulent world, there's another set of cognitive skills that might matter more: the ability to rethink and unlearn."⁴ This is both a skill set and a mindset.

Going beyond the binary often requires us to relearn what we think we know, and that is not easy. It asks us to suspend judgment, to be open-minded, humble, and, hence, vulnerable. And it doesn't end there. Living in a nonbinary understanding of the world takes maturity. It means that we live in a more complex world, and there often aren't easy, or simple, answers.

Living beyond the binary requires room for complexity, uncertainty, and paradox, all of which are generally uncomfortable. It is helpful, Grant says, if we learn to "...recognize complexity as credibility,"⁵ allow time and space to be confused, and approach our confusion with curiosity. He uses this phrase I love, "I need time for my confusion."⁶

² Adam Grant, *Think Again* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), 165.

³ Grant, *Think Again*, 4.

⁴ Grant, *Think Again*, Prologue.

⁵ Grant, *Think Again*, 165, 171.

⁶ Grant, *Think Again*, 199.

There is a difference, however, between recognizing that unlearning takes time and using that as an excuse to remain confused or not make a decision. One of the paradoxes of this whole thing is that we need to make a decision, even in the face of complexity, which is in itself binary thinking.

There are many places I could go with this sermon, numerous binaries to explore and debunk. I'm going to stay with gender because it is an issue that is relevant and important to our church, for individuals and as a collective. I invite you to extend this exploration beyond gender, however. There is a lot of good writing and research about this topic, and it is critically important as we live in a society increasingly polarized politically.

The World Health Organization defines gender as:

"...the socially constructed characteristics of women and men—such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.

"When individuals or groups do not 'fit' established gender norms they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion—all of which adversely affect health. It is important to be sensitive to different identities that do not necessarily fit into binary male or female sex categories."

National Geographic approaches the issue of the gender binary with great seriousness. Its 2017 Special Edition, dedicated to the topic, said this in the introduction:

*"But something profound is happening around gender, whether we choose to see it or not. We thought these stories needed to be illuminated. These are not the stories of celebrities in evening dresses on magazine covers, but those of regular people around the world whose choices are changing our societies. I commend them for their bravery in letting us see into the good, and bad, of their lives."*⁸

The story, experiences, and expression of gender are changing quickly and are no longer binary,

⁷ <https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab>

⁸ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pdf/gender-revolution-guide.pdf>, 3

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not that they ever were. In a 2015 study in the United Kingdom, 43% of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds place themselves in the non-binary area.⁹ And yet, there is no legal recognition of nonbinary genders in most places.¹⁰

National Geographic Editor in Chief Susan Goldberg writes, “Now that we know XX and XY, and blue and pink, don’t tell the full story, it is time to write a new chapter to ensure that we all can thrive in this world no matter what our gender—or decision to not identify a gender.”¹¹

We have an annual meeting fast approaching on Sunday, June 12th at which time we will, among other things, be voting again on the proposal to change the pronouns in our bylaws to be gender neutral. This entails six incidents in the bylaws, most of which refer to the minister, and changing the language from “he or she” to “they.” Sadly, it appears to me that this has become a binary issue of its own, with those who agree and those who do not agree.

We’ve been spending some time this year reflecting on our history, and we will certainly do more of that as we approach our 300th anniversary in 2025. I wonder what our forebears would say if they were here right now. We’ve heard stories of people leaving the congregation because we took down the American flag in the sanctuary, changed hymnals to a more recent version, and took the Lord’s Prayer out of the weekly liturgy. Is this that time again? Is change underfoot in our society, and as a religious body, are we in relationship to that change? I think we are.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The revelation of thought takes men out of servitude into freedom.”

We are a religious body which stands for inclusion and the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We recognize the right of each person to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. If that is true in theology, it is most certainly true in self-identity, understanding, and expression. The decision of changing the pronouns in our bylaws to gender-neutral

⁹ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2015/08/16/half-young-not-heterosexual>

¹⁰ Barker and Iantaffi, *Life Isn't Binary*, 67.

¹¹ Barker and Iantaffi, *Life Isn't Binary*, 67.

language is about respect for all people. I will not tell people what I will call them. I will ask who they are, be honored when they share their stories with me, and call them by their true names as they determine them. I will respect their journey in every way possible.

These principles of the freedom of expression and belief were bedrock to our faith long before it became Unitarian Universalism. This church has stood in this town, with a steeple beaconing a message of religious tolerance, freedom of expression, and sanctuary to those in need of safety.

I believe our forebears would applaud the work we are doing next door and in the community. I think they would tell us to remember the children and care for them and preserve this religious society for their future. I believe they would remind us to care for one another always, and not to get entangled in unnecessary strife, but to hold true to the doctrine of this church, love.

Amen and blessed be.

After sermon before the hymn:

I hope you will participate in the congregational conversations about this year’s annual meeting, including the proposal to have gender-neutral pronouns in our bylaws. The conversation will be held in person and online on May 1st – next Sunday. The in-person discussion will be after the service and the Zoom discussion will take place at 5pm the same day.