

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.” These are the words of the unnamed African American character in Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man.”

Imagine being invisible for a couple of hours...maybe a full day. It might be nice. It might even be liberating in a way – nobody asking anything of you, nobody expecting anything, nobody asking you to share your mint chocolate chip ice cream, nobody bending your ear about something you really don’t care about. Yes, it might be liberating...for a while.

Yet as the hours and days spin into weeks, months, years...your invisibility might begin to grate on you. You might eventually get angry, confounded by everyone’s inability to see you as you truly are...or at all! It might feel like you’re in some twisted twilight zone episode. It might eventually lead to depression and it might ultimately cause one to consider the actuality of one’s own existence.

Ralph Ellison was writing about his experience as a black man, yet who else might be invisible? Who else might not be seen for who they truly are...or at all?

This Wednesday, March 31 is the Transgender Day of Visibility. The need for such a day obviously suggests that invisibility can be part of a trans persons lived experience.

How might that be? Well, for those of us who don’t identify as trans, there are likely several things that we do or do not do, that contribute to their feelings of invisibility. Perhaps, it’s everything that we do or do not do.

Where to begin? What could we begin to do differently? Maybe we could begin to think differently.

Take gender. Yes, gender...you know female, male, pink, blue. That sums up gender, right? Our brains can’t help but try to categorize things. It is an evolutionary survival mechanism used to quickly sort through things (e.g. edible, not edible, friend, foe, safe, dangerous, etc.). The brain instinctively categorizes things using minimal brain power so that it can focus on other tasks.

Yet simply because it wants to instinctively categorize things doesn’t mean that it does so correctly...or more importantly, or that it is even appropriate to categorize certain things at all. For example, our brains instinctively categorize people according to a gender binary.

Rev. Mykal Slack and Alex Kapitan of the Transforming Hearts Collective, an organization that, among other things, “helps faith communities practice radical inclusion and dismantle oppression in all of its forms (Transforming Hearts Collaborative website)” says, “A binary is two distinct and disconnected parts...the gender binary is a system of classifying all people into two distinct and disconnected forms with no overlap and no exceptions. All bodies, identities, roles,

attributes, ways of being are assigned to one box or another, again with no overlap, no other options (Mykal Slack, Alex Kapitan, Transgender Inclusion in Congregations, Module 3).”

The gender binary is two boxes - a pink box and a blue box; and the boxes are taped shut. Could it be that those who don't feel that they fit in the neatly prescribed boxes might be invisible to us? Might that be what they're telling us? Might their very existence point to the idea that gender just might be an arbitrary binary designation that we've invented?

So, let's pull the tape off and unpack the gender binary a bit. (This information is based on their online course Transgender Inclusion in Congregations; a course we offered here at UUMAN last year and one we hope to offer once again this coming fall.)

Although there are others, there are three main components that are essentially conflated into what is now the gender binary.

First, there is biology. One's anatomy has been used as the be all and end all when it comes to deciding what we call gender. There is male anatomy, female anatomy yet also intersex anatomy. In fact, according to the Intersex Society of North America, 1 in 1500 people have ambiguous genitalia. As a reference point, about 1 in 2000 people in North America are UUs; which means that there are more people in North America with ambiguous genitalia than there are UUs!

Yet anatomy is merely one aspect of biology when we talk of gender. Biologically speaking we all have various hormone levels and chromosome combinations.

Second, there is gender expression. Expression is cultural. Expression is how behaviors, appearances, dress, speech patterns, roles, occupations get mapped on to cultural gender expectations or stereotypes (e.g. stereotypical jobs for males, jobs for females, men play this sport, women play this sport, men wear these clothes, women wear these clothes, etc.). People can express themselves as masculine or feminine or as androgenous; yet again, masculine, feminine or androgenous expression can differ in one's culture. It can differ between Roswell and Little Five Points!

The third, and possibly the most complex, component to consider when unpacking the gender binary is identity. Identity is simply how one identifies oneself, how one identifies one's own sense of being. What makes it complicated is that identity can get reduced to labels and therefore can get trapped in language. When it comes to language, we all likely define words differently. When does a boy begin to identify as a man? When does a girl begin to identify as a woman? Man, Woman, Intersex, Queer, Bigender, Agender are some identity terms. There are many, many identity terms because they are labels of sorts and fixed labels might work for me yet not for you. For some people, "Trans" is an identity term, yet for other people it is not.

The most important thing about identity however is who gets to apply the identity terms. We don't get to place identity terms on others. People choose identity terms for themselves.

Do we have the courage to see that how we've been using gender, as a binary, might simply be an invention...a construction...an illusion...and that that illusion has rendered many, many people invisible? Can our UU principles tolerate the invisibility of people who we claim are endowed with inherent worth and dignity as their birthright? I know that they can't.

Yet this isn't about our UU principles. This isn't even about UUMAN and this is most definitely not about those who do not identify as Trans. This is bigger than us; again, it's not even about us. It is about those who are invisible; and our responsibility to them – a responsibility that transcends whether or not they're members of UUMAN, pledging friends; whether or not they'll ever even visit us.

The question for us is, what would that responsibility to them, to the invisible, look like at UUMAN?