

Some Spiritual Gifts of Being Queer: a meditation on inclusion, justice, reconciliation and Love.

Serena Patterson, 2018

Introduction

The full inclusion of GLBTQ2S people in the life of the church goes far beyond welcoming the stranger or being good to the oppressed. Inclusion is a profound theological decision, and it both reflects and moves how we interact with the scriptures, with God revealed in everyday life, and of course, with one another.

When our church moved to include, with conscious intent, all genders and romantic orientations, we may not have known just how this would unfold, theologically speaking. It would, of course, be an offering to those who had been excluded and hurt by homophobia. This was enough to justify the decision. Inclusion is so clearly a reflection of how Jesus interacted with the marginalized, and of how Paul and the Apostles spoke and wrote about the development of the early church. The New Testament is largely a story about how the followers of an amazing Jewish Rabbi were transformed, through ongoing dialogue across cultures and with the Holy Spirit, into a movement that was to be for and with anyone, from anywhere and from any social class, gender, or occupation, and with any and all gifts given by God.

But that is not all there is.

In exchange for the welcome, I have been thinking, “what do LGBTQ2S people bring to the church?” Or perhaps I should say, “what do we bring back to the church?” since the act of marginalizing a group of people necessarily means marginalizing some important facets of every person’s common humanity? And isn’t this why we create categories of “others” to exclude; so that we have a place to put the parts of ourselves with which we are uncomfortable? Don’t we place things with which we are uncomfortable “over there”, so that we can hold them in contempt or admire them as strange and exotic, always at a distance but, paradoxically, always in sight? Thirty years as a psychologist

have taught me that splitting off a part of oneself and projecting it on to others is a large part of the explanation for prejudice and bigotry.

And so, with the thought of bringing them back to the wholeness of community, I have pondered the particular gifts that I associate, myself, with the path of being queer within a hetero-normative society. Some of these gifts may apply to anyone, queer or straight. Actually, they may all apply. But these are things that feel especially salient because of the special role that they have played in my journey of becoming fully my own self, and of recognising what the Quakers call “that of God” in my life and being.

I have written here about 7 such gifts, roughly in the order of a journey from first “hearing” a call, through following and discovery, longing for wholeness of community, and finally, reunion and reconciliation through God.

1. Being called.

“When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to look, he called upon him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses.” And Moses answered, “Yes, here I am.” God said, Come no nearer; take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

(Exodus, 3: 4 & 5, New Internationalist Version Bible.)

First, there is the gift of being called to something unexpected. Not exactly like Moses, but no ordinary thing, either, to be witness to a voice inside, maybe still and small or maybe roaring like a lioness, saying, “this isn’t the life I’m made to be living!” It’s disturbing, disrupting, exhilarating, confusing, and, for each of us, it reached a point of being undeniable.

Did that voice that I just named come from God? I don’t think I’d put it exactly that way—but anybody who was raised a Christian AND realized their queerness had to decide at some point that the voice did not come from Satan. Because, of course, that’s what we were told to believe.

But belief isn’t faith, and faith is what counts.

2. Faith as trust; beyond belief.

I will stand at my post. I will take up my position on the watch-tower, I will watch to learn what he will say through me, and what I shall reply when I am challenged. [...] The reckless will be unsure of himself, while the righteous man will live by being faithful.

(Habakkuk, 2: vs. 1 and 4.)

“I meant what I said and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful one-hundred percent!”

(Dr. Seuss, Horton Hatches the Egg, 1940, Random House.)

How did I know that the call to live my life queerly came from a good place? Because by the time I knew that I was a lesbian, I already knew God. I had grown up with the feeling that God accompanied me like a big invisible friend. As a young child, I simply counted on the character of God being consistent. Just as I knew that my parents would not run off with the circus and my sister would not sleep under the bed all night, I knew that God would not condemn genuine, caring love.

Even now, I do not believe in God, any more than I believe in myself. God is not Santa Claus or Tinkerbell, a being that depends upon belief or that judges us for our adherence to fairy tales.

Nor do I count on other people's beliefs about God.

I experience God. I know God.

Beliefs are borrowed, conjured tools that we use in order to better connect with the Divine. They are what psychologists would call cognitive tools or schemas—metaphors, images, or frames that we use to understand something that is, in its very nature, ineffable. Un-nameable. Beyond language, beyond image. Beliefs are to be cherished when they bring us into contact with the Divine. If they are clogging up the channel of communication, they need to be challenged, changed, re-shaped, and re-framed.

Faith is deeper than belief. Faith is the kind of trust that we have when we learn to lean back on water and float, or barrel down a small hill on skis, or close our eyes to sleep. It is the ability to experience ourselves in the palm of God's hand (that's a metaphor), safe, even if everything around us and in us is not safe in any material sense. Faith is the absence of fear.

Faith is also commitment. To be faithful is to be trust-worthy, to walk a certain path, to take care of somebody, to be present emotionally and with one's own truth.

Religion that puts belief above faith has a problem in the modern world. If we judge one another on belief rather than on faith, we run the risk of demanding allegiance to silly things, like the earth being created 6000 years ago as a flat plate with a bowl-like sky over it, with holes in the sky for the light and the rain to come through.

As Queer Christians, we questioned belief. If belief said, "God doesn't want you," then we went with the deeper experience of a faithful God who held us dear. We ditched belief for the deeper part of faith.

In spite of what we were told, we got this right. We felt something good and leaned back into it. And, like salt water, the love we felt buoyed us up. We are still here—we didn't sink.

3. Discernment—knowing the false from the true.

*"When it comes, to separating false from true; that's when I know,
I know I need the love of you."*

(Pete Seeger, False from True, from Pete Seeger at 89, 2008, Appleseed Records.)

*Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad;
you can tell a tree by its fruit.*

(Matthew 12: 33, American Standard Version Bible.)

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that
by testing you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

(Romans 12: 2, New Internationalist Bible.)

“It was a close place. I took . . . up [the letter I’d written to Miss Watson], and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: ‘All right then, I’ll go to hell’—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming.”

(Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn, Chap. 31, 1885, Webster & Company.)

How do we know who do listen to? Which way to go?

This is how we know—not through blindly following something we are told, but rather by keeping our eyes open to what is revealed. It’s a very Biblical thing, this noticing, trusting, and testing of one another’s words. Not all prophecies are equal; not everyone who claims to speak in the name of the Divine is really doing so. Prophets argue with prophets all the time in the Bible, and ever since the first books of the Bible were set down as the Pentateuch some five thousand years ago, people have been arguing about the meaning of every bit of text written there.

Here are three things about God and the Bible that I was lucky enough to be taught by my parents at home.

- “God gave you a brain—you are supposed to use it. There is no question you can ask that will lead you away from God.”
- “The Bible was made by humans, not by God. Don’t ask, ‘did this really happen?’ Ask, ‘who told this story? When? To whom? And why did they tell it this way?’”
- “God is love. If it isn’t loving, it’s not God.”

Now, wasn’t I a lucky child? These three guides—curiosity, seeing the Bible as a sacred text but NOT a dictated History of the World by God, and of course Love-- have served me well in separating false from true.

They prepared me to discern the truth when it hit me over the head, and to hold on to that truth even when I was told it was false. God is love, and love doesn’t make us blind but shows us the truth more clearly.

4. The love.

*“I could cry salty tears,
Where have I been all these years?
Little wow, tell me now:
How long has this been going on?
There were chills up my spine,
And some thrills I can't define.
Listen, sweet, I repeat:
How long has this been going on?”*

(How Long Has This Been Going On? 1928, George and Ira Gershwin.)

*My beloved speaks and says to me:
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,
for behold, the winter is past;
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.*

(Song of Solomon, 2: 10-12, English Standard Version Bible.)

*So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and
whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

(1 John 4:16, English Standard Version Bible.)

My heart's love is my partner Monika. Ours was a friendship that turned to romance in our 37th year. It seemed like such a miracle—like when I got new glasses at age 7 and could see every single leaf on the trees, or when I learned to swim, which is kind of like flying. It was so easy, so thrilling, and so natural to me.

When I think that I might have gone my whole life not knowing that feeling—of being broken open by tenderness toward another—I could weep. It is beautiful, unexpected, and sacred.

That's all I can say—love is the center of it all.

Our longing for love—for sexual and romantic love as well as friendship and family love, and for the connection to that Divine Love that we call God—these are our most sacred and delicious longings. No more do we accept the lie that they are in conflict. Love is good.

5. Gender Freedom and Creativity.

Before the coming of this faith we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

(Galatians, 3: 23-29, New International Version Bible.)

When I was a child, I learned the usual rules about who did what. Dads went to work, mowed the lawn, and barbequed. Moms cooked indoors, cleaned the house, and made things that we needed, like our clothes.

I believe that my feminist awakening had to do with gender roles and my slightly older brother. I have a vivid memory of playing “war” with the neighborhood children, when we were about 7 and 8. Steve was in an uppity mood that day, and took it upon himself to inform me that I could play, but only if I was a nurse. Not a soldier, not a spy. A nurse.

“I don't want to be a nurse. I want to be a spy.”

“Girls can't be spies. Only nurses. Or they can stay home.”

“But that's not fair.”

“Yes it is, because boys are better at this stuff.”

“No, they aren’t.”

“Yes, they are.”

“Prove it.”

“OK, name me one thing that women do better than men.”

“Sewing.”

“Nope. All the world’s greatest fashion designers are men.”

“Cooking”

“All the great chefs are men.”

“Being teachers.”

“They only let women teach little kids. When you get to college, all the teachers are men.”

Me: “um... ..”

My brother, “Name me one female president, Serena. Just one.”

I knew before I had the words to explain it that there was something about gender that nobody was talking about. Women were obviously as smart as men in my world, probably smarter. So, what else was going on??

The problem with gender and me, from then on, was its use as a marker for privilege. Like the Princess who felt a pea under 20 mattresses and awoke each morning bruised, I kept looking for the source of my discomfort. No matter how many layers of nice, soft, silencing foam you laid upon it, a real working steam engine was a way better Christmas present than an Easy Bake Oven—that hurt. And when my teenaged brother made \$5.00 an hour doing farm work while I

made .60 an hour babysitting, that too was a very hard pea to sleep upon. The expectation that I would take care of his supper afterward if my mother was away was more than a pea—it was a boulder under the mattress. But nobody seemed to see it but me!

Immediately upon leaving my “straight” marriage, I lost a script that if you had asked me, I would have denied following. That script told my husband and I who drove the car, who fixed the roof, who apologized when the house was dirty, and who fussed about daycare. It didn’t keep me from paying the bills, but it did keep me from trying to fix the washing machine (he did it, with Super-glue. Lots of Super-glue.) It didn’t keep him from changing diapers, but it did make me feel awkward about it when his family was around.

When you leave behind the gender binary script, all of that stuff still has to get done. But who does it, and how, is now up for grabs. The bad news is that you have to make up new rules for everything. The good news is you get to make up new rules for everything. Life in the Queer lane is Art.

There is more to gender than oppressive rules and stereotypes. There is a code of binaries and opposites that is useful for exploring human experience. It’s true; we are all made up of male and female characteristics. Carl Jung was right about that.

Free to creatively play, I found that gender could be fun. I could love me a chainsaw femme, and I could be a baby-soft, lipstick butch if I wanted to. I could bake cookies in the morning and repair the drain in the afternoon. I could learn to fix a car, or just call in the professionals if I was too busy writing essays.

Much creativity flows after blowing up the gender binary.

Sometimes the Bible celebrates gender as representing the full range of possible images of God. “In his image He created them; male and female he created them,” says Genesis. And sometimes the Bible gives us the go-ahead to forget about gender if it gets in the way of community, justice, or wholeness.

The Divine is so ineffable that through much of the Old Testament it is forbidden to speak of it by name. “I am the I am.” “In the beginning was the Word.” These

are not things one says about something that can be summed up in one gender, one half of the human experience.

In the Kingdom or Queendom of God, we live in the paradox of male and female meaning nothing, and also meaning a great deal. Gendered images allow us to feel the closeness of the Divine, by cloaking it in something familiar. God is represented as a mother, a father, a lover, and a brother (as Jesus). Many, many times translators have stumbled upon references to God where the original Hebrew pronoun is not gender-specific; the fact that God is called He is mainly an accident of translation. I guess the Romans also had difficulty with pronouns, just like I do today (I am trying to adopt the gender-neutral singular “they,” but 55+ years of using “they” only as plural keeps tripping me up. I am fortunate in having patient non-binary friends).

But one thing is clear: the early Christians saw Jesus as a liberator from systems that dished out privileges according to man-made categories, including Master and Slave, Hebrew and Gentile, and Male and Female. As a system of oppression, gender was getting in the way of God’s grace. Biblical historians say that some went so far as to live as Holy, Androgynous people (which apparently embarrassed the Apostle Paul).¹

And so, let us mix up and confuse and blow up the binaries with grace.

6. The thirst for Justice.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be satisfied.

(Matthew 5: 6, English Standard Version Bible.)

“Don’t give up, I believe in you all. A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

(Dr. Seuss, Horton Hears a Who, 1954 Random House.)

Bear with me for a segue.

¹ My brother, Stephen J. Patterson, has written about this. See for example his blog-post, *The Praying Androgynies from Corinth*, 2017, at www.stephenpatterson.org/#blog-section.

This is as good a time as any to revisit those few scriptures that warn about men “lying with men as though with women.” Please notice one thing: nowhere in the Bible does it forbid anyone to love another person based upon gender. In every case, the sex referred to was constructed not as a loving act, but as an act of aggression or domination. This is the case with Sodom and Gomorrah—the problem wasn’t that these were gay cities, but that they were breaking the desert code of hospitality by threatening to rape newcomers!² Elsewhere in Bible the Prophets condemn Sodom and Gomorrah as places where social justice was violated and where people treated one another badly.³

Remember, in Biblical times there was no Gay Pride movement. There was no such a category as “heterosexual” or “homosexual.” As far as we know, men had sex with women and with men, and some of these sexual relationships were kind and respectful in the context of a patriarchal culture, while others were humiliating, exploitative, or violent. Women were especially vulnerable because a pregnancy that went unclaimed by any man condemned the woman to social ostracism. An unwed or divorced mother often became a prostitute by default, with no other way to live. Life-long and intimate bonds between men were common, especially within the military. Think of David and Jonathan.

Neither Jesus nor his followers saw fit to “call out” any loving relationships as unholy. But Jesus, the prophets before him and the apostles who spread his word and story afterward all called out sexual and other relationships that were exploitive, humiliating, or violent. They all communicate, “treat each other well, or else... you could end up like Sodom.” Poor Sodom, having rejected the grace of God, ended up destroyed entirely and ironically by salt—the ancient means of preserving stuff.

² See Stephen J Patterson, “Sodomy”, in *The Fourth R*, 26/2 (2013) 9-10.

³ Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned several times in the Bible as examples of what happens to people who incur God’s wrath. In no passage after the original story in Genesis is the specific crime attributed to Sodom and Gomorrah the sexual one. Deuteronomy and Isaiah cite the crime of worshiping other gods besides the one Jewish God with whom the Israelites had a covenant; Amos is concerned primarily with Israel’s failures in social justice which caused suffering to the poor; Matthew and Luke refer to people who fail to greet Jesus’s followers with hospitality; Romans, 2nd Peter and Revelation refer to people who hear but fail to heed prophets and followers of Jesus. Thus, it would seem that to people in Biblical times, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was about a lack of faithfulness to the Covenant of God’s people (the Israelites)—a Covenant that called for devotion to one God, kindness and justice, hospitality, and paying attention to the wisdom that is offered by strangers.

If you doubt this, and still wonder what the Bible really has to say about it, you have two choices. You could stack up all of the verses referring to homosexual sex on one side of the teetertotter, and all of the verses referring to being loving, kind, nonjudgmental, and fair to one another on the other side of the teetertotter, and decide which side weighs more.

Or, you could join the historical scholars arguing over sources and translations, and ask my mother's questions, "who said this, to whom? What did they mean? Why did they put it that way?" And see where that leads.

Either way, I think you end up with this: the people giving advice in the Bible about sex mostly wanted to say something like, "be nice. Keep it loving, and equal, and not humiliating. Don't use sex as a weapon."

Now, isn't it a little bit ironic that the verses we were told meant that WE were an abomination, actually meant that it was an abomination to be mean to strangers? Or that it is an abomination to use sex as a weapon? I should think so!

By insisting on social justice—also known as equality, for all people, we are fulfilling the Bible's message.

One of the prophets who invoke the image of Sodom to warn people of his age about the consequences of ignoring God's requirements is Amos. Amos's concerns are not about following particular rules of purity or pious rituals. Amos is completely consumed with God's longing for social justice—that is, for kindness, inclusion, and fair distribution of the community's resources among the needy.

What else does the Bible say about social justice? Plenty. It's right up there with "love thy neighbor" as being the central, repeating theme of the whole thing.

The prophet Micah sums up God's desires for humanity in perhaps my favorite verse of the entire Bible. Micah says simply,

God has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: To do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

(Micah 6:6-8, Common English Bible.)

It is not selfish for us to long to be treated as equals around the table of God's people. It is right that we should do this. Because our longing for justice—for recognition, dignity, inclusion, and full integration into the body of the church (often called the body of Christ), is mirrored by God's own longing. For us, and for others who have been marginalized or who have needs that are unmet. When we call for justice, even for ourselves, we are calling for the healing of the church, and the reconciliation that follows exile and estrangement from the family of God.

7. Reconciliation.

*“On the willows there, we hung up our lyres
For our captives there required
Of us songs, and our tormentors mirth*

*Saying, ‘Sing us one of your songs of Zion,
Sing us one of your songs of Zion,’
But how could we sing
Sing a new song
In a foreign land?’”*

(Stephen Schwartz, “On the Willows”, from Godspell, 1971.)

*Do not be afraid, for I am with you.
I will bring your children from the East and gather you from the West.
I will say to the North, ‘give them up!’ and to the South ‘do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created in glory,
whom I formed and made.*

(Isaiah 43:5-7, New International Version Bible.)

Marcus Borg, in “Reading the Bible Again for the First Time,” shows how one story is repeated again and again in the Bible. It goes like this:

God loved us, and so God helped us. We were happy and appreciative, for a while, walking with God.

But then we got lost in our human anxieties. We started accumulating things, and we got greedy. We made rules, and we got legalistic. We put our faith in things of our making—wealth, rules, rituals, and categories of who was “in” and who was “out.” Worst of all, we got mean to one another, forgetting the widows and orphans and sick and elderly people who needed help and justice.

Prophets arose, and tried to turn this around. They warned of disaster—wars, exile, and so on—if people didn’t turn back to God. (This is, in fact, the old meaning of “repent”—it simply means, “Come back to the path of Love. God is missing your company.”)

But people are stubborn. Bad things happen. They build towers that fall down, cities that get turned into dust. They end up enslaved in Egypt, or get carted off to Babylon in exile, or find themselves looking up at a crucified Rabbi, wondering what went wrong. Again.

And each time, God gathers them/us back in. We come back to the path of love, justice and mercy. The circle is mended.

For years I thought that I had been sent into exile by a church that wasn’t ready to accept people like me completely. I used to drive by full churches on Sunday mornings and feel sad for my loss of music, tradition, and fellowship. I was the one, I thought, sent to Babylon, away from the church of my childhood. Had I sinned? Had I wandered? I see it differently now.

The church is a human thing; as are our Bible, our traditions, our hymns, our beliefs, and our rituals. I’m not saying these are not sacred. I’m just saying that they are not God.

If the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, two-spirited and non-binary people of God were forsaken, it was by humans, not by God. God has been here all along. To the degree that we managed to hold on to our faith in that love, we have not been outside of the gates at all. We’ve been on the inside. And we’ve been in good company—there, on the cross, even though he may doubt, in his

extreme loneliness, if anyone is still there for him, is Jesus. And, still, God meets him and us, wherever we are. God gathers us in.

The crucifixion was carried out by people who were the throes of the same old temptation that we all keep meeting in the Bible and in life—the temptation of false certainty based on law, greed, and perhaps most of all that intoxicating feeling of being one of the “in” crowd in an exclusive club.

But people who can't see the beauty of our love don't speak for God.

Like Horton the Elephant, God believes in us all. Like the God of Israel, God brings us back from exile. Like the father of the prodigal son, God waits for his errant people to come home.

I might have sins—mistakes and behaviours that separate me from God sometimes until I wander back onto the path—but being a lesbian isn't one of them. In this, I was doing my best to hold fast to what I knew to be true: that God is love.

But I think that much of the Christian community did wander far when it took up the mantle of homophobia and tried to make it stand for God. To take our two most sacred longings: the longing for human love and the longing for divine love, and to pit those two against one another was wrong. To shame us for our loving or for our longings for love was spiritual abuse. It hurt us deeply, and, because it was hatefulness toward creation, it hurt those who practiced it as well. It separated them from us and from God. It scattered us to the four directions, and we have know the lonely, homesick feelings of Israel in Babylon, far from home.

To take one more story of separation and reunion, the church is now beginning to heal like the family after the return of the prodigal son. But the roles are not what we may have thought. We LGBTQ2 Christians are not the prodigal sons and daughters. We are like those who stayed close to home, listening to the voices of love in the way that God gave us to do that. And it is we who are called to be generous of spirit, to welcome others back into the circle, and to rejoice together in reconciliation.

Together, Queer and Straight, we carry the seeds of a new church, a new Jerusalem, a new world.

How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful?

How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole?

How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?

How deeply you're connected to my soul.

(Libby Roderick, "How could Anyone?" from If you see a Dream, recorded 1990, Turtle Island Records.)