

Meeting a Person Who Is Intersex
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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My daughter is pregnant. One of the questions now answered even before birth is, "Is the baby a boy or a girl?" My daughter was told she is having a girl. The wife of one of the people she has cared for in her job has already made three little pink sweaters.

Way back when one of my cousins had a baby identified as a boy they brought him home from the hospital in a football jersey for their team.

Socially and culturally we attach meanings to those designations – boy – girl. But what about those among us who are not clearly either?

In 2011 ABC News began an article this way, "Jim Bruce was born with XY male chromosomes but ambiguous genitals. Doctors couldn't be sure if he had a large clitoris or a small penis and were convinced he could never live a "satisfactory life" as a man.

"So shortly after his birth in 1976, Bruce's external organ and testes were surgically removed and he was raised as a girl.

"He struggled for years, preferring 'rough and tumble' play and being attracted to girls.

"I was unhappy, but it was really difficult to ask questions,' said Bruce, now a 34-year-old writer from California.

"When he was 12, Bruce was given female hormones so his body would feminize. Then, at 18, he prepared for a vaginoplasty – 'designed to allow me to have sex with my husband.'

"But he knew something was wrong and, battling depression, sought his medical records when he was 19.

"I knew that I wasn't a girl,' he said.

"What Bruce discovered was horrifying. 'I was sterilized at birth -- and no one ever told me,' he said.

"An estimated 1 in 2,000 children born each year are neither boy nor girl -- they are intersex..." [Intersex Babies: Boy or Girl and Who Decides? - ABC News \(go.com\)](https://www.abcnews.com/news/2011/01/intersex-babies-boy-or-girl-and-who-decides/).

Bruce ultimately identified as male, but today some people who identify as intersex choose not to choose. That has not always been an option.

I titled this sermon “Meeting Someone Who is Intersex.” My story of that meeting is not so different from Bruce’s story. As I transferred from United Methodist to Unitarian Universalist ministry in the mid-nineties I needed to belong to a UU congregation as a member for a year. In order to do that I did a residency year of Clinical Pastoral Education at a general hospital. The students in the course chose areas of the hospital in which to concentrate our experience. My areas of concentration were the orthopedic/neurological floor, hip replacements and strokes mainly, and the psychiatric unit, mainly patients dealing with depression.

There was a person on the psychiatric unit who I saw as a young woman. That was the way she was registered. But she told me that part of her depression was having learned that she was born intersex. She was about my own age, born somewhere in the late fifties or early sixties. Her parents and the doctor did what was done back then. The doctor performed surgery choosing the easier route. Let’s make this baby into a girl. But the person I encountered in the hospital in their young adulthood was now asking “Am I a woman?” Society was only offering them two answers, male or female. But were either of those really right? This person was struggling. They were depressed and potentially suicidal. The Intersex Society of North America was founded in 1993, but I sure didn’t know about it to offer this person that resource. There is more out there today than when I met this person in the early 1990s.

The Cleveland Clinic has an informative webpage on Intersex. It says in part, “What does it mean to be intersex?”

“People who are intersex have reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t fit into an exclusively male or female (binary) sex classification. Intersex traits might be apparent when a person’s born, but they might not appear until later (during puberty or even adulthood). You may never notice their intersex traits externally and you might only find out about them after a surgery or imaging test.

“In the past, being intersex was known as having a disorder of sex development (DSD), and you might see it referred to this way in some places. But being intersex isn’t a disorder, disease or condition. Being intersex doesn’t mean you need any special treatments or care. But some people who are intersex choose gender affirmation options if their gender doesn’t match the one they were assigned at birth.”

The Clinic says that “An estimated 1 in 100 Americans is intersex. Around 2% of people worldwide have intersex traits.” They also say that “Being intersex can present in about 40 different ways. The most common intersex traits include:

“Combination of chromosomes: Everyone inherits sex-linked chromosomes from their parents. People who are male have XY chromosomes. People who are females have XX chromosomes. People who are intersex may have a mix of chromosomes, such as

XXY. Or they may have some cells that are XY and some cells that are XX. Or they may have just one X chromosome (XO). Other combinations can occur too.

“...A person who is intersex may have ovarian and testicular tissue (ovotestes). For example, you may have genitals that are associated with being assigned male at birth (AMAB), like a penis. At the same time, you may have internal reproductive anatomy or hormone levels more closely associated with being assigned female at birth (AFAB), like estrogen... “People who are intersex have a range of gender identities, just like everyone else. Some people who are intersex consider their gender to be intersex. Others identify as female, male, nonbinary or a different gender...”

“Does being intersex affect fertility?”

“If you’re a person who is intersex, your ability to conceive a child depends on your reproductive anatomy. Many people who are intersex can have families through assisted reproductive technology (ART). This may involve in vitro fertilization (IVF), using donated eggs, sperm or embryos, or having a gestational carrier (surrogate)...”

The page ends with “A note from Cleveland Clinic

“Being intersex might cause you to have lots of questions, especially after learning about it for the first time. People who are intersex may be self-conscious about their appearance or struggle to fit in with peers. It can be helpful to connect with others who understand these challenges. Talk to your healthcare provider about support groups and other resources that can help you feel seen and heard,” [Intersex: What Is Intersex, Gender Identity, Intersex Surgery \(clevelandclinic.org\)](#).

I was a student chaplain in the mid-nineties without this information. I might have better served the patient on my unit if I had known, which is why we are having this service today. You may not have the title chaplain. You may be friend, uncle, aunt, grandparent, cousin. But, if you have this information, you may be able to better understand someone in your life and offer them your care.

Being intersex is not the same as transgender. Cleveland Clinic puts it like this, “A person who is transgender identifies with a gender that’s different than the sex they were assigned at birth. A person who is intersex may be transgender if their gender identity doesn’t match the sex they were assigned or raised as,” [Intersex: What Is Intersex, Gender Identity, Intersex Surgery \(clevelandclinic.org\)](#).

None of us is ever going to understand everything about gender, but that does not mean we shouldn’t try. If you make a mistake or say something that offends apologize, be open to further learning, and work on keeping your connection.

The Wikipedia article on Intersex says that, “Globally, some intersex infants and children, such as those with ambiguous outer genitalia, are surgically or hormonally altered to create more socially acceptable sex characteristics. This is considered controversial, with no firm evidence of favorable outcomes. Such treatments

may involve sterilization. Adults, including elite female athletes, have also been subjects of such treatment. Increasingly, these issues are considered human rights abuses, with statements from international and national human rights and ethics institutions. Intersex organizations have also issued statements about human rights violations, including the 2013 Malta declaration of the third International Intersex Forum. In 2011, Christiane Völling became the first intersex person known to have successfully sued for damages in a case brought for non-consensual surgical intervention. In April 2015, Malta became the first country to outlaw non-consensual medical interventions to modify sex anatomy, including that of intersex people,” [Intersex - Wikipedia](#).

As individuals and as a society we need to learn and to advocate. Being aware of people who are intersex and what the needs are is part of our responsibility as a Welcoming Congregation.

May we continually learn how to be more welcoming.

Monica Jacobsen-Tennessen puts it like this,

“Welcome! What you bring—who you are—enriches us all.

“We say ‘Welcome’ to your joy, your hope, your pride.
We say ‘Welcome’ to your grief, your fear, your anger.
**And the parts of you that are not yet ready to be seen and heard—
Welcome to them as well.**

“For we are **people of faith:**
Faith in our expansive welcome
Faith in our ability to grow
Faith in the precious gift of our truths
Faith in the promise of trying, learning, changing
Faith in our capacity to know ourselves and each other ever more deeply.

“Welcome to you who are **gay, straight, bi, pan, lesbian, queer, questioning, unable to be contained in any word.**
Welcome to you who are trans, cis, genderqueer, nonbinary, intersex, agender, beyond words.
Welcome to you who are human.
Welcome to you who love and are loved.
Welcome to you who are blessed (which is all of you).”