

Two Sexes, Many Genders and the perils of thinking in dichotomies

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Framing it wrong

Considerable ill-feeling has erupted between *some* natal women and men and *some* trans-women and men within the NeoPagan community. And I emphasize the term “*some*.” One group argues only natal women are women in the most complete sense, the other that trans-women are as much women as natal women in every relevant sense. Stated in these terms, it is a classic either/or conflict with battle lines drawn in ways guaranteeing no middle ground will be recognized. But this framing of the issue is fatally confused.

Before getting into this divisive issue, I want to describe an alternative approach to how sexuality and gender is usually framed today. Much of the venom we are currently experiencing arises from ways of thinking rooted in monotheism, ways that are increasingly misleading for understanding many modern problems. In a word the venom arises from thinking in terms of dichotomies and objects rather than relationships and contexts.

Hidden biases

Rene Descartes was one of the most important early modern philosophers, and played a central role in strengthening people’s confidence that reason could provide important insights without relying on scripture. Descartes’ view of reason was disembodied, arguing that thinking was superior to and separate from the body. My body might be an illusion, but “I think, therefore I am.” A serious Catholic, Descartes argued, among other things, that this separation of mind from body proved the existence of a soul. It subsequently became a staple assumption of modernity.

I think it is no accident that Descartes was a man. A man can relatively easily imagine himself as a disembodied spirit, a pure mind that inhabits a body, who takes it off when moving on. Major male philosophers have long regarded emotions as hindrances to rational thought, and regarded women as too emotional. Emotion supposedly interfered with, and could even

override, the rational mind. Sexuality in particular was mistrusted because of its ability to dominate the disembodied mind. While himself a Christian, one of Descartes' achievements was to make this case in a potentially secular fashion. In doing so he helped set the stage for the dominant scientific and philosophical currents of the modern world.

Descartes' approach opened up a still unanswered challenge. Given the gulf between mind and matter, how could our minds interact with our bodies? Descartes argued they did not, and God correlated our minds with our mechanical bodies. This answer was not particularly satisfying to many at the time, and is less so now. But the distrust of the body's relationship with mind remains.

Today, the alternatives usually discussed in the cultural mainstream are that mind is some kind of emergent process from unconscious foundations, or it is some kind of illusion, and our behavior is actually reducible to law governed physical phenomena. Scientists interested in the issue generally agree that uncovering the nature of consciousness is "the hard problem."

The methods early science discovered for investigating the physical world assumed a mechanistic reality compatible with Descartes' separation of mind from the physical realm, and viewing emotion and subjectivity were sources of error. The methods most respected in science seek to be as impersonal as possible, hence the central importance of prediction, measurement, and experiment. In all these cases the personal element is to be as limited as possible.

This approach has been amazingly successful with regard to studying the world as made up of physical matter. No other way of learning about this world comes close to its successes. But, and this is an important but, to the degree that subjectivity is a part of the world, science's tools are much more difficult to employ. Sex as a biological category is well suited in traditional methods of study. Gender, which incorporates social and psychological elements, is much less so.

There is another issue here. Scientists' profound faith in reason values it as an impersonal standard able to win respect from people who otherwise disagree. When science arose during a time of religious war, this was important. Star Trek's Mr. Spock or Data are depictions of this scientific ideal mind. And, of course, Data is an android characterized by AI. Emotion gets in the way of reason.

Natal women's lives are far more obviously subject to physical biological processes than are natal men. The cycles of fertility and menstruation have psychological effects that most such

women recognize as important. The capacity to give birth, and the basic questions that capacity opens to how life should be lived, shapes a woman's life in ways no man can truly experience. We men can recognize it, when reminded, but we cannot put ourselves in a woman's shoes and expect a close fit. That a woman's frame of mind is obviously sometimes linked to her body has justified many male scientists in believing women will never be great scientists, regardless of the evidence before them. Emotion is considered disqualifying from a dedicated search for truth, and women are more emotional than men. Untangling this snarl of concepts is complicated, and I will give a simplified but I think not misleading account, because it will lead us towards thinking more clearly about gender and sexual issues in our community.

Natural cycles

I am not arguing men do not experience cycles of change with biological roots. We certainly do. But, except for the sex drive, they are not as powerful physically or psychologically as they are for women. And many of us will readily grant our sex drive often challenges our rationality. Bodily influences as challenges to the disembodied ideal of the rational mind is confirmed by our sex drive. And so, we men are disproportionately comfortable with the disembodied ideal of pure reason as the road to truth. I think this is the source of the (usually male) fantasies of somehow inserting our minds into robots, so we can be immortal.¹

I also think this difference in our experience of the power of bodily cycles is why initiations of men into adulthood tend to be more of an ordeal than those of women. In a biological sense, it is absolutely clear when a girl becomes a woman. It is not nearly so clear for boys becoming men. The first wet dream does not do it. Boys prove themselves as men through their initiations, which are often frequently painful and grueling. Even today there is a deep cultural attitude that joining the military can make a man out of a boy.

For girls becoming women, the proof is biological. There is plenty of suffering from the cycles women endure, but one thing they do not have to wonder about is whether or not they are

¹ BBC News, The Immortalist: Uploading the mind into a Computer, March 14, 2016.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35786771>

women rather than girls. In their case formal initiations, while often very important, are rarely physically painful.²

Years ago, I was on the Crow Reservation in Montana. My host was a Sun Dance priest. During the Sun Dance, long thongs are linked to a ceremonial pole, with pegs on their other end pushed through part of the dancer's chest. During the ceremony the dancer continually dances, pulling against the pole, until eventually the pegs are pulled out of his chest. Other painful offerings are made as well. A young male Crow told me that when he and other men danced, they considered the pain they suffered as *their offering to their tribe, in a way analogous to the pain women suffered during child birth, as they gave to their tribe.*

Much recent science and philosophy has demonstrated that *all* human beings' thinking is much more linked to our bodies than the traditional mostly male idea has grasped. For example, the previous sentence uses a term directly connected to our embodiment to make to point: "grasped." George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have demonstrated our bodies shape our language, our thinking, and our conceptions of knowledge for all of us, men included.³ The notion of a disembodied mind is much less accurate than one emphasizing its intimate relationship with our bodies. A disembodied mind would not be a human mind.

In this respect, the woman's bodily perspective is more accurate than the male's more disembodied one. This does not deny there are important insights in the more male dominated perspective, insights some of us find strengthened in life when we astral project. But this mind, either in fantasies of disembodiment or in experiences such as astral projecting, *has already been shaped by our embodiment.* Psychologically, we take our embodiment with us when we depart.

Two worlds

² Martin Wong, Boys to Men: African Male Initiation Rites into Manhood, *The Society for the Psychological Study of men and Masculinity*, <http://division51.net/homepage-slider/boys-to-men-african-male-initiation-rites-into-manhood/> Brett and Kay Mckay, 8 Interesting (And Insane) Male Rites of Passage From Around the World, *The Art of Manliness*, Nov. 2, 2018. <https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/male-rites-of-passage-from-around-the-world/> ; Judith K. Brown, A Cross-Cultural Study of Female Initiation Rites, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Aug., 1963), pp. 837-853 <https://www.drabruzzo.com/BROWN-1963-A%20Cross-Cultural%20Study%20of%20Female%20Initiation%20Rites.pdf>

³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; *Philosophy in the Flesh*, (NY: Basic Books, 1999).

In short, natal women *live in a different world experientially* than do men, and for them, living in harmony with that world is a more biologically rooted experience than it is with men. Women's spirituality seeks to honor these cycles and patterns that play such an important role in their lives, cycles and patterns, which men do not experience. *This would be true even if women were in all other respects regarded as equal to men.*

But in fact, women are often not so regarded. To these biological dimensions of the female experience we must add the much more frequent sexual abuse they experience, compared to men. After the advent of the #Me Too movement, I asked a number of women friends of different ages, from the 70s to the 30s, how many of their friends probably experienced such abuse. *Every one* answered "100%." I have been told that such abuse is so prevalent that many women walk around daily with this potential threat on their minds. We men do not. Without in any way denigrating the abuse some men experience, particularly as boys, the percentages for us are much lower. And often healing rituals for women who have suffered rape or other such abuse are felt, by women, to be more appropriately conducted by women with a close connection to such experiences.

Women, men and the earth

I think the relative intensity of embodiment in women's lives helps shed light on the stronger *visceral* connection between women and the earth than is the case with men. This is a touchy subject, because some men have been extraordinarily sensitive to nature and its spiritual dimension, and much of my own academic work has focused on these issues. For decades my morning prayers of gratitude have ended with thanking Gaia, Mother Earth. But as a matter of emphasis, many women writing on nature describe their relationship in a more immediately bodily way than do we men. Let me illustrate this point with quotes from two of my favorite writers on this subject: Arne Naess and Terry Tempest Williams.

Naess writes⁴

What would be a paradigm situation of identification? It is a situation in which identification elicits intense empathy. My standard example has to do with a non-

⁴ Arne Naess, Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World, *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, Alan Dregson and Yuichi Inoue, eds., (North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, 1995), 15-16.

human being I met 40 years ago. I looked through an old-fashioned microscope at the dramatic meeting of two drops of different chemicals. A flea jumped from a lemming strolling along the table and landed in the middle of the acid chemicals. To save it was impossible. It took many minutes for the flea to die. Its movements were dreadfully expressive. What I felt was, naturally, a painful compassion and empathy. But the empathy was not basic, it was the process of identification, that 'I see myself in the flea'. If I was alienated from the flea, not seeing intuitively anything even resembling myself, the death struggle would have left me indifferent. So, there must be identification in order for there to be compassion and, among humans, solidarity.

Terry Tempest Williams writes⁵

I see the Feminine defined as a reconnection to the Self, a commitment to the wildness within – our instincts, our capacity to create and destroy, our hunger for connection as well as sovereignty, interdependence and independence at once. We are taught not to trust our own experience.

And⁶

A man or woman whose mind reins in the heart when the body sings desperately for connection can only expect more isolation and greater ecological disease. Our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild.

To my mind, these passages in Naess's and Williams' work are beautifully written and deeply insightful, but in different ways. Anyone can say I cherry picked these examples, and in fact, I did. I picked for contrast, and insightful writing on nature overlaps across genders. But there are differences in emphasis, and I think these differences are reflected in these contrasting quotations.

⁵ Terry Tempest Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the field*, (NY: Vintage 1994), 53.

⁶ Williams, 64.

A friend who has followed this debate online sent me a fascinating example of the same pattern within a very different context: writing Haiku. He is writing on the history of English Language Haiku (ELH) anthologies.

The first ELH anthology was called *Borrowed Water*, and published in 1966. It consisted of haiku by 13 women who lived in California, and presented haiku as an embodiment of seasonal themes. The haiku were not arranged by author, but by season (which is the traditional Japanese arrangement). The group shared their haiku and collectively decided which haiku to include.

The second ELH anthology, *The Haiku Anthology*, was published in 1975. It has 3 times the number of authors as 'Borrowed Water.' There were 25 men and 13 women; and 260 haiku were by men and 31 by women. The anthology was compiled by one man, with no collective discussion. In the second collection the haiku were arranged by author, not by season. The individual was highlighted and the seasonal embodiment given lesser status.

In *Borrowed Water* there were numerous haiku about young children through teenagers and how the authors, all women, related to these events. In *The Haiku Anthology* there were none on this theme. The issue here is not the quality of the haiku, which my friend considers excellent in both anthologies, but rather the different sensibilities exhibited, sensibilities in keeping with what I have written, using very different examples. My friend wrote me "I don't think any of this was conscious. But I also think there is a lot to unpack from these kinds of examples."

With this background, I want to turn to the present conflicts over the roles of gender and sexuality in NeoPagan religion.

Pagan religion

Defining Pagan religion can be complicated because it manifests in so many ways, all reflecting the cultures within which they formed. For my purposes I will seek to cut the Gordian knot of definition, and identify what I think is the core insight separating Pagans from other religious traditions such as monotheism, Buddhism, and some varieties of Hinduism.

Pagans in general share a belief that we exist within a world where we can enter into reciprocal relationships with some of its more than human dimensions, and that it is good to do so. There is no sharp divide between the material world and the world of spirit. This world is also

fundamentally good and its basic characteristics provide guidance for entering into and maintaining these relationships. A central ideal common to at least most Pagan spirituality then, is, as best we can, to live in harmony with these powers/entities/deities. I As a subset of Pagans, I think NeoPagans generally reflect these insights in the many traditions we practice.

There is one additional point to be made. Buddhism and the Abrahamic traditions all claim ultimate superiority for their religion compared to all others. Except for Judaism, which focuses on a single people, all send missionaries out to teach others - usually Pagans – of the error of their ways. By contrast, no specific Pagan religion makes such claims to exclusivity.

Women's spirituality

Not all Pagan religions have given an important role to women and their relationship with the sacred. However, women's spirituality has been a *central* dimension of modern NeoPaganism, and women have been disproportionately influential in its rise as well as sensitizing other religions to honoring their feminine dimensions and the role women play within them.⁷ In addition, their influence has not simply been as individuals who happen to be women, they have also emphasized the importance of feminine values and sensibilities which have historically been slighted or even condemned by modern monotheisms, by Hinduism, and by Buddhism. Their influence even on these other religions has far exceeded their numbers.

Feminists were prominent among early Pagan leaders. Unlike what is often called “First wave feminists,” who argued for women’s equality in masculine terms, these women focused on supporting women coming into their power *as women embracing feminine values*. Especially within the spiritual and religious realm, this also included their experiences as women, and not just as human beings. Many important early covens were Dianic, open to women only, and focused on reclaiming goddess traditions, female rights of passage, and healing from patriarchal inculturation. They performed important work in deepening the American NeoPagan community’s challenge to dominant cultural norms then so taken for granted as to seem unquestionable to most.

As a part of this process, they elevated the spiritual importance of women’s experiences as being at least equal to those of men. And since women’s experiences were often more

⁷ Gus diZerega, *Faultlines: The Sixties, the Culture War, and the Return of the Divine Feminine*, (Wheaton: Quest, 2013). 162-75.

obviously linked to their bodies, they emphasized spirituality's connection with the body and its cycles. By contrast, much other contemporary spiritual thinking and teaching emphasized getting away from bodily functions, which is a masculine bias.

Female Pagans disproportionately emphasized the sacrality of biological rhythms associated with their being women as well as the more universal celebration of broader natural rhythms, as in Sabbats and Esbats. The rise of rituals and practices focused on “women’s mysteries” was an important element in NeoPagan religions, even those not explicitly emphasizing women’s spirituality. For example, the symbolism of Maiden, Mother, and Crone is almost universally understood, and often incorporated into many NeoPagan traditions.

Emphasizing the sacredness of biological rhythms also led to a different way of describing the natural world and its cycles as sacred. Much of the Pagan ecological world view is embedded in the appreciation of the female experience. While there are other good routes to this insight, NeoPagans played an important role in changing how many people thought about their relation to the other-than-human world. For example, Reclaiming played an important role in supporting Earth First!’s fight to prevent the destruction of a large portion of California’s remaining virgin redwood forests, a fight that ended successfully.

In short, NeoPaganism as a whole owes an enormous debt to feminist Pagans who honored and emphasized the importance of women’s mysteries and the divine feminine. I will go farther. One of the places where NeoPaganism offers something of particular value to the modern world is the sacralization of embodiment, and this sacralization is intimately related with biological processes of life. Those who attack it arguably seek to replace NeoPaganism with something different, but appropriating our name.

Today *some* Pagans in the trans-community are challenging this focus on natal women’s experiences as not being a legitimate dimension of modern NeoPaganism. In a profoundly disembodied way, mental identity is privileged over embodiment, which is physically experiential. **I believe this perspective constitutes a serious threat to our larger community.**⁸ I want to emphasize here the importance of *spirituality as embodied* and explore how such a

⁸ On this subject, I also recommend Ruth Barrett, The Attack on Female Sovereign Space in Pagan Community, *Female Erasure*, Ruth Barrett, ed., (Mason, MI: Tidal Time Publishing, 2016). 357-78. There are many important essays in this volume. Barrett is criticized as being a TERF, but her and many other contributors’ emphasis on embodiment is an essential point.

spiritual perspective can make sense of what some claim to be a zero-sum conflict within our community.⁹

Attacking Women's spirituality

The run up to 2019's PantheaCon witnessed an unprecedented assault on practitioners of traditional Pagan women's spirituality. This included rescinding an already accepted speaking engagement by Max Dashu, a leading Pagan writer and scholar. Her invitation was withdrawn based on anonymous accusations which she denied. PantheaCon's official statement never offered any information by which other Pagans could come to an informed conclusion about the matter.¹⁰ The more I have investigated this issue the more convinced I have become the charges were deeply dishonest.¹¹ This effort to silence Pagans favoring the view biological women were significantly different from trans-women in ways meriting spiritual respect was not an isolated example.

To give another example, different Neopagan groups have long paid for hotel suites, offering meet and greets and more specialized or focused events not easily suitable for inclusion in the official PantheaCon program, or for some reason not given official space. One of these was called the Red Tent, which offered space primarily for biological women dealing with issues important to them, activities often described as involving "Women's Mysteries."

In their description of what led to their withdrawal from PantheaCon 2018, The Red Tent Temple explained it was partly due to some Pagans' claim to be "outraged" and "irate" by its very existence, and who found the "entire concept of the red tent" to be offensive. When

⁹ I will not spend time here discussing efforts to subordinate Pagan religion to political agendas, although I think this is the ultimate subtext for many of those attacking women's spirituality. Anyone who has had a genuine spiritual encounter with a deity or other powerful force will readily acknowledge the profound inappropriateness of such efforts. There is plenty to be said criticizing those who subordinate spirituality to politics, but I will not say it here. (That would be another paper.)

¹⁰ <https://pantheacon.com/wordpress/about/current-issues>

¹¹ See for example the account of what really happened at Second Wave Lesbian Feminists Statement Against Anti-Woman Violence, Terfing, and No-Platforming: A Call to Sisterhood, Truth, and Reconciliation http://www.calweb.net/~mschulter/Naomi_Circle_Statement.pdf

combined with demeaning restrictions imposed by PantheaCon’s staff, this hostility led them to withdraw.

What were these restrictions? The PantheaCon management team told them to change their description of events to include “events for All, Male Allies, Self-identified Women, and a couple of limited access for specific groups (semi-private),” erasing the female *experience* as central to the Red Tent’s purpose for attending Pantheacon. In fact, they were told by PantheaCon representatives dealing with their presence that such topics should “be only advertised in the suite, word-of-mouth or other means...Using the term ‘initiates only’ is something our pagans can accept easily.” The Red Tent believed any intentional focus on “Women’s Mysteries”—even in private, was suppressed.

A broad range of experiences important to biological Pagan women were turned into second class issues unworthy of explicit description. As Red Tent’s website put it, this included “childbirth, miscarriage, abortion, menopause, and other issues and diseases related to female embodiment, such as toxic social conditioning, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and other body traumas, are all valid and worthy of our exploration.”

These restrictions were imposed even though the Red Tent had been at PantheaCon before, and paid the full cost of their expenses, independent of the formal PantheaCon system. Ultimately the Red Tent was able to satisfy the conditions demanded of them, but finally decided it was better not to participate, explaining “Standing in our integrity, we are unable to comply with this repressive mandate.” Consequently, “we are mindfully choosing to disengage from any and all distractions that would divert time and resources from our sacred work. Given the history at this event and the extended/open nature of a four-day Red Tent experience, we ultimately just do not have confidence that we can keep everyone safe (mentally, spiritually, and physically).”¹²

For my purposes, the issue here is not whether the Red Tent should have accepted the terms they were offered. That was their decision. I bring this case up, along with Max Dashu’s expulsion, because their critics exhibited a deep hostility to women’s spirituality, ironically in the name of Pagan religion. Or, as PantheaCon’s official rather arrogantly described it, in the name of “our pagans.”

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-red-tent-lost-forest-lodge/red-tent-pantheacon-2018/1993757523974547/>

“Tran-women are women, end of discussion”

I and others have given reasons why in certain important contexts transwomen are not identical to biological women. In response, the slogan “transwomen are women” is asserted as a rebuttal. End of discussion. I am saddened this so-called ‘argument’ needs addressing, but I have heard it so often I must.

It has two fatal flaws. First, it ignores context. *Everything* exists in a context that helps shape it.

This error is remarkably similar to when anti-choice people say a fetus (or even a fertilized egg) is a human being and that ends it. Well, *biologically* a fetus, or fertilized egg, is *more* a human being than a transwoman is a woman. But the relevant context here is not biological, but moral standing. To be fully human in moral standing one must be able to participate in the human moral world. Women can, fetuses and zygotes cannot. Without going further into the many errors of the anti-choice argument, it is clear to all honest people that a cell possessing a human genome is not the same as an adult human being morally. (For more see my essay “On Why Arguments Against Abortion Fail.”¹³)

The same kind of error is true for the argument transwomen are women. *In some contexts* transwomen are women. But, to pick a hopefully noncontroversial example, sports competition is not one of them. No honest person would say transwomen are like natal women in athletic ability. There are good and obvious reasons the sexes are separated in sports, and these reasons have nothing to do with sexism or transphobia. If hormonal treatments led to a transwoman having the same kinds of physical abilities as natal women, there would be no problem with combining both together, but they do not.

Biology and gender are related, but not identical. To the extent it sacralizes the physical phenomena in life, the differences in how many Neopagan religions approach sexuality is firmly rooted in traditional distinctions between sexes. Some emphasize a Mother Goddess and a dying and reborn God, or an Oak King and a Holly King. Others emphasize the Mother, maiden, and Crone. The ultimate divine reality is beneath these ways of symbolizing it, but they all focus on difference as expressed through sexuality.

¹³ Gus diZerega, On Why Arguments Against Abortion Fail, <http://www.dizerega.com/2018/05/07/why-arguments-against-abortion-fail/>

NeoPagan traditions are also not usually open to all who want to come. A particular tradition, such as my Gardnerian one, will often allow guests, but for certain rituals only people who have *experienced* elements peculiar to our tradition are allowed. A ritual regarding women's (or men's) embodiment follows the same logic. People who have *experienced* the kinds of things deemed relevant for the ritual are invited and those who have not are not. In some cases, natal women and trans-women will have had similar experiences, and in other cases they will not.

For example, it is *no one else's business* how the Red Tent related to other than natal women. Those who said its presence was in some way distressing to them had *no business* seeking to influence a pan-Pagan gathering. They were aggressors, attacking one of the foundations of our religion- the sacredness of our embodiment.

I will add that this 'argument' against women's spirituality follows the logic of male claims to entitlement at their most crude. "I believe something about me that you are not allowed to question and that you must honor." Why? "Because I said so." This is the *essence* of patriarchal privilege.

Hidden Agendas?

I find it interesting that advocates for trans-women being in no significant way different from biological women ignore experiential and religious dimensions of the issue. In online discussions I have frequently brought these issues up, and never had anyone attempt to address them beyond a woman who answered we need to get beyond "fertility religion." That comment proved to me she had no idea what NeoPaganism was, no matter how she defined herself. Is NeoPaganism reducible to May Day or the Great Rite? And what does this contemptuous attitude tell us about how she views the sacredness of female cycles?

More often I have usually been told biology does not matter. A person's personal choice as to their identification is all that matters, without any explanation why this is true. The mantra 'transwomen are women' is then used to end the conversation.

I would argue these transwomen and their allies are thinking in traditionally male ways. Almost all trans women were raised male, and even if they *felt* they were female all along, they still received male training and socialization through their formative years. For many of them, disembodied ideas and the ideology of identity trump subjective bodily experience. For me, this

fundamental contrast *confirms* the claims of those biological women who argue that, in important respects, trans-women are not identical to them.

Energetic issues

I think the difference between natal women and natal men also extends to *some* dimensions of subtle energy. Let me explain.

I worked for six years in an Afro-Diasporic healing tradition rooted in Brazil, but possessing a significant Buddhist element as well. The work was basically shamanic- healing through work with spirits as well as with basic forms of energy, or 'chi'. This energy could be strong enough to almost knock a person over, or cause them to temporarily lose control of their body.

With experience, men and women were regarded as equally capable of working with this energy and with the entities that aided us. These entities manifested as male or female, sometimes without regard to the gender of the person through which they came. One of mine manifests as an old woman, a *Preta Velha*. I still occasionally work with her.

The one difference between the work men and women did at the center involved the most intense healings, what some would call exorcisms. Women were discouraged from deep involvement in such workings. The reason was that, energetically, women were oriented towards taking in energy, (such as the spirit of a future child), whereas men were not. Therefore, men were less likely (but hardly immune) to pick up seriously bad energy during such a cleansing.

In the absence of a qualified man, qualified women were considered able to do such work. However, if they did, they were urged to do certain visualizations to protect themselves, visualizations we men did not have to do. The issue here was psychic safety, not the innate ability of women or men.

We KNOW energetic differences exist between people at the individual level, such that many of us will not circle with some people, at least in a small group. We KNOW energy from a person's state of mind can impact a group working. Those of us who work frequently with such energy KNOW our focus and emotions shapes the energy we use. Upon reading an earlier version of this article, a woman friend told me at PantheaCon in the year after the initial dispute arose over female sacred space and the Red Tent, a session involving an indigenous practice did not allow menstruating women to attend. Native Americans I have spoken with tell me this has

nothing to do with any inferiority on women's part, but rather the greater energy arising from the flow of blood. And in a great many older Pagan traditions, blood is considered powerful either to facilitate or disrupt a ritual.

Of course, words are cheap. Sometimes they hide patriarchal values within a veil of spirituality. But my own experience says that this is not always the case.

It should not be controversial to suggest that biology, childhood socialization, and whether we are shaped to take in energy from elsewhere or not, can all be relevant issues, depending on the ritual concerned. In a purely devotional ritual it will matter less than in one involving serious healing work. A Midsummer Sabbat deals with very different energies than does a ritual designed to heal a person who has been raped or honoring pregnancy.

It follows that some rituals are most appropriate for just trans-men or trans-women, some for biological men or women, some for straights like myself, some for gays, and some for any other kind of gender mix, depending on its purpose and the energies involved. This should not seem strange to NeoPagans with experience in rituals that are more than purely devotional or celebrational.

It is better to have equivalent places created for trans people undergoing the challenges they face in this, the most important choice they will make in their lives, than to ban special places where the importance of such experiences become a focal point. And the same holds true for natal women and men.

Of body and spirit

But can spirituality be disembodied?

Yes, it can, and not just in the pathological way that treats the body as a barrier to be overcome.

Disembodied spiritual experiences have been reported by people within perhaps every religious tradition as well as people claiming none at all. Some are body-denying, seeing our bodies as impediments to spiritual growth, others simply ignore embodiment. There is the feeling that we are part of something larger than ourselves, larger than humanity, and perhaps larger than we can conceive, and that it is good to be in harmony with this Ultimate Context. I have had such mystical or unitive experiences. This kind of experience cuts across all religions, and even some who call themselves atheists have had it. According to Pew Research Center's findings, 8%

of those calling themselves atheists say they believe in God or a universal spirit and 2% are “absolutely certain” such exists.¹⁴ Such spiritual perspectives are neither Pagan nor anti-Pagan.

Pagan religions often explicitly recognize such a dimension, be it called the Dryghtyn, Olodumare, the One, Tao, or by some other name. But because this dimension includes everything equally, it does not speak much to our experience as individual beings living discrete lives in this world. No one seeks a personal *relationship* with the Dryghtyn, Olodumare, Tao, or the One. Such experiences provide a way of encountering the Ultimate Context as meaningful, powerful, and deeply transformative, but it is not a dimension with which we can have a personal relationship. A personal relationship must always be differentiated from the whole, and a Pagan approach to spirituality *emphasizes* personal experiences and relations with many entities in a variety of individuated contexts.

It is within this dimension that women’s spirituality has given us so much of value - even to us men. *To marginalize or reject the legitimacy of biological women’s focus on the spiritual dimension of embodied experience eviscerates a vital core of what differentiates NeoPagan religions from other spiritual paths.*

Reconsidering the trans identity

To this point I have made an argument that criticizes Pagans who have attacked natal women’s rights to have rituals limited only to women like themselves. But this does not fully do justice to this issue.

People transitioning between genders want a legitimate place to identify with when they leave the biological identity they felt they never fit. Until such a space is affirmed, and honored, they remain in a kind of cultural limbo with no respected status in society, and so subject to many kinds of invidious discrimination and even violent assault and death. The attempted suicide rate among transgender persons is shockingly high, ranging from 32% to 50% depending on the country examined in a recent study.¹⁵ The number murdered or executed for being trans is out of

¹⁴ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/10-facts-about-atheists/>

¹⁵ H. G. Virupaksha, Daliboyina Muralidhar and Jayashree Ramakrishna, Suicide and Suicidal Behavior among Transgender Persons’ *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 2016 Nov-Dec, 2016; 38(6): 505–509. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5178031/> . Some claim the statistics are over stated. <https://4thwavenow.com/2018/12/19/the-theatre-of-the-body-a-detransitioned-epidemiologist-examines-suicidality-affirmation-and-transgender->

proportion to their proportion of the population.¹⁶ Some claim the solution to their problem is to demand that all trans-women are women in every relevant way, and the same holds for trans-men.

But their experiences are fundamentally different in many ways from the energetic, historical, and psychological conditions of natal women who today have often spent much of their lives seeking to strengthen the status of women and the feminine on their own terms, free from patriarchal and masculine domination. They feel invaded from the outside by people who have never experienced the biologically-rooted dimensions of what it is to be a female. For example, trans-women have never menstruated, never experienced menopause and cannot give birth. By contrast, the biological woman may spend at least 30 years or more of her life menstruating. Often this time is accompanied by significant discomfort or pain. In addition, the question of whether or not to have children is one of the most important a biological woman can ask. None of these experiences, so central to a biological woman's life as a woman, are ever experienced by trans-women. And this list could be extended significantly.

So what are we to make of the legitimate trans desire to be accepted as equally worthy of respect?

Fluid boundaries

No issue in how we see ourselves goes more deeply than our relationship with our bodies. Are we at home in them or do they seem alien to us? Do we carry a sense of shame in their physicality, or not? Today, nothing seems more obvious to us in the Pagan community than that of gender and its fluidity.

What years ago, was simply a re-envisioning of what it was to be a woman in second wave feminism has led to greater recognition that in terms of sexual desire, a great many people are not purely heterosexual. Further, the balance of sexual desire varies for individuals. I am about as heterosexual as a man can be, I also have long-time male friends who are gay, and there are many men who are bisexual, probably including some who are friends of mine.

[identity/](#) Whatever may be the case, (and I do not claim to know) there is no question that many people disapprove of people seeking to change genders.

¹⁶ <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/beheaded-gunned-down-and-stoned-to-death-368-trans-people-killed-this-year/#gs.8lev30I>

I always wondered about those critics of gay men and lesbians who said it was a choice, (and a bad one). For me no choice was involved, and, on the other end, many gays have said the same. So far as we can tell, some of us did not 'choose.' But for a person attracted to both sexes, it could be a choice to be open to both or suppress one inclination and accept the other. For some people I suspect the choice to suppress was a very conflicted one, hence, their hostility towards gays who 'chose' differently.

Many trans-people emphasize the matter goes even deeper for them. Even from a young age, many felt they had been born in the wrong body. As small children, many liked to wear the clothes of the other sex. And as medical science made it increasingly possible, many took the step of seeking to become more completely the gender to which they had always most identified.

Like the rest of us, people transitioning between biological genders want a legitimate community to identify with, all the more so when they leave behind as best they can the biological identity they felt never fit. Until such a space is affirmed and honored they remain in a kind of cultural limbo with no respected status in society, and so subject to many kinds of invidious discrimination, and even violent attack and murder.

In terms of openness to different kinds of gender identification, the NeoPagan community is probably the most accepting religious community on earth. In many (but not all) cases, even traditions that are based on a basic distinction between God and Goddess, like my own Gardnerian one, successfully redefined how people were identified ritually from biological to psychological identification. By contrast, even after 1000 years, the monotheistic traditions are deeply divided and often advocate violence and worse against gay and trans Christians or Muslims. I think the contrast could hardly be greater.

But many NeoPagans have difficulty knowing how trans people fit into this framework, and it seems most conflicted among some Pagan women. That the conflict would be most intense there fits my argument that women's spirituality is far more connected to the body and its rhythms than is male spirituality. (I admit I know next to nothing about how gay male covens or other all male groups react to trans-men seeking involvement, but at least on the surface, serious conflict does not seem very visible.)

Many biological women agree trans-people are as worthy of respect and care as any other human being, while arguing that, like men, they are not on the same spiritual wave length. These women do not want them involved in rituals designed to serve the needs of natal women. These

women do not think it appropriate for trans-women to require natal women to redefine who they are.

But trans-women also have a point. They feel themselves no longer to be men and identify as women. The most recent research in genetics suggests theirs may not be simply a psychological condition, but itself is biologically rooted. There has been an extended discussion as to whether there is a “gay gene.” It turns out the answer is more interesting than a “yes” or a “no.”

A recent study involving over 490,000 men and women discovered four genetic variants that occurred more often in people who reported having had same sex sexual partners. As Andrea Ganna reported “There is no gay gene, but rather nonheterosexuality is influenced by many tiny-effect genetic factors.”¹⁷ Some studies have gone further, and discovered characteristics within the transgender brain that fall in between what is typical for either sex. They are *biologically* transgendered.¹⁸ However, we know that the brain responds to how it is used, and so it remains an open question even here as to the balance of genetics and experience.

Sexual preference arises from many genetic factors as well as, perhaps, environmental ones. The exact contributions of both are still unclear. Brain studies suggest the same is true for gender identification. Even setting reincarnation-connected issues to one side, it is likely that sexual identification may also involve a range of possibilities, some of which are suppressed within a culture thinking purely in terms of sexual dichotomies.

Getting free from Christian framing

As human beings we are predisposed to thinking in terms of dichotomies We often frame choices in terms of “on the one hand but on the other.” The distinction between a corporeal body and an incorporeal mind is an important example. If we were descended from terrestrial octopuses our way of framing choices would be much different, and probably more nuanced. But we are not descended from octopuses, we are descended from bilaterally symmetrical apes.

¹⁷ Tina Hesman Saey, Same-sex sexuality linked to DNA, *Science News*, Nov. 10, 2018. 10.

¹⁸ Shawna Williams, Are the Brains of Transgender People Different from Those of Cisgender People? *The Scientist*, March 1, 2018. <https://www.the-scientist.com/features/are-the-brains-of-transgender-people-different-from-those-of-cisgender-people-30027> ; no author given: The Transgender Brain, *Trans City: Serving the Kansas and Missouri Transgender Community*, <http://transacity.org/the-transgender-brain/>

This bias, *rooted in how we perceive from within our bodies*, is made worse by habits imported from Abrahamic monotheism. In the Abrahamic traditions God created two distinct sexes, starting with Adam and Eve. Therefore, anything that diverges from what God supposedly created as perfect, is evil.

As a consequence, within Christian-shaped cultures, even Pagans will often incorporate monotheistic assumptions into their thinking, at least until we question them. Until we do, they comprise our taken-for-granted world. So as a culture we are predisposed to prefer dichotomies to the complexities of different contexts. But dichotomous thinking is exceptionally ill-suited to understanding gender issues.

As a statement by second wave lesbian feminists put the matter, lesbians “face a push to turn us into generic ‘LGBTQ people’ whose community and culture, rather than being founded on our unique and woman-defined heritage, are dissolved into a vague (and usually male defined) ‘LGBTQ’ or ‘Queer’ culture.”¹⁹

On balance NeoPagans have successfully integrated gay and lesbian Pagans into our community as equals. We have successfully blurred this Christian-rooted dichotomy. Some gay Pagans happily participate in rituals celebrating both the Goddess and the God, because no one would exist without the biological reality of two sexes. Both Dianic groups and some gay male groups focus only on the sacred dimensions of their own sex. And many engage in both.

However, with respect to trans-Pagans, especially trans-women, how to relate to them is now creating enormous conflict in our community, putting us in a no-win situation where either women’s spirituality is discredited and erased or a significant portion of our members feel they have no legitimate place in which to call home, spiritually.

Two Spirits

I suggest some traditional Pagan societies offer us better ways of thinking about these issues, and among them, some Native American societies have much to teach us. Before their

¹⁹ Second Wave Lesbian Feminists Statement Against Anti-Woman Violence, Terfing, and No-Platforming: A Call to Sisterhood, Truth, and Reconciliation
http://www.calweb.net/~mschulter/Naomi_Circle_Statement.pdf

conquest by Christian powers, many of these societies took a multi-gendered approach to these issues. We can learn from them.

Like our own, these tribal cultures often had members of both biological sexes who felt called upon to take the role of another gender. Unlike our own, they were often accepted, and honored. A Navajo friend told me, for example, that there are several terms for gender identification in his language. Duane Braboy writes “At the point of contact [with Europeans], all Native American societies acknowledged three to five gender roles: Female, male, Two Spirit female, Two Spirit male and transgendered.”²⁰ Whether “all” or a great many, it seems clear that gender roles were not conceived in the way they were by Christian Europeans.²¹ In addition, many of these people were highly honored. It also appears to be the case that the impact of missionaries led to the virtual disappearance of this openness.²²

Whether “all” or a great many, it seems clear that gender roles were not conceived in the way they were by Christian Europeans.²³ In addition, many of these people were highly honored. It also appears that the impact of missionaries led to the virtual disappearance of this openness.²⁴

Northern Native Americans are not the only example. The 50,000 indigenous Guna Yala people of Panama maintain a gender fluid society that is reflected in their earliest mythology. Those we term trans-women have a recognized and respected place in Guna society, and are considered to possess a “third gender,” termed *Omeggid*. It is in no way a second-best.

²⁰ Duane Braboy, “Two Spirits, One Heart, Five Genders” at *Indian Country Today*.
https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/two-spirits-one-heart-five-genders-9UH_xnbfVEWQHwKjNn0rQQ/

²¹ For example, Hamish Copley, Missionaries, Explorers and the “Berdache” *The Drummer’s Revenge: LGBT history and politics in Canada*, June 13, 2007.
<https://thedrummersrevenge.wordpress.com/2007/06/13/8/>

²² Hamish Copley, The Disappearance of the Two Spirit Traditions in Canada, *The Drummer’s Revenge: LGBT history and politics in Canada*, April 11, 2009.
<https://thedrummersrevenge.wordpress.com/2009/08/11/the-disappearance-of-the-two-spirit-traditions-in-canada/>

²³ For example, Hamish Copley, Missionaries, Explorers and the “Berdache” *The Drummer’s Revenge: LGBT history and politics in Canada*, June 13, 2007.
<https://thedrummersrevenge.wordpress.com/2007/06/13/8/>

²⁴ Hamish Copley, The Disappearance of the Two Spirit Traditions in Canada, *The Drummer’s Revenge: LGBT history and politics in Canada*, April 11, 2009.
<https://thedrummersrevenge.wordpress.com/2009/08/11/the-disappearance-of-the-two-spirit-traditions-in-canada/>

Anthropologist Diego Madai Dias observed “The Guna have taught me that children should have sufficient autonomy, as their ‘self’ comes from the heart, from within, and starts manifesting early. So if a male child starts showing a tendency toward being transgender, (s)he is not prevented to be himself.”²⁵

Interestingly, women in Guna Yala possess an elevated status compared to women in Panama generally, or here, for that matter. In another article on the Guna, Sydney Krantz writes “In mythology the woman represents the mother earth and therefore everything comes from her.” Consequently, the most important celebrations she learned of were the birth of a baby girl, when a girl reaches puberty, and when she gets married: in other words, patterns directly related to women’s biology. Kuna families are matrilinear, and traditionally the groom becomes part of the bride’s family and takes the bride’s last name.²⁶

The articles I found describe their traditional religion as based on nature in ways seemingly very compatible with a NeoPagan sensibility, but I could find little detail.²⁷ I have no idea whether there are women-only gatherings, or whether Omeggid are included in gatherings where biological men are excluded. Perhaps others with access to a good university library can discover more.

Consequently, I am unaware of whether Omeggid have any different religious status from biological women. However, their founding mythology includes three people, a man, a woman, and an Omeggid, and it is clear that in a nature-oriented religion, biological patterns along with an individual’s sense of their own gender identity matter deeply. There seems no conflict between respecting Omeggid people and a focus on women’s life patterns as deeply important to their social and spiritual lives. Based on this example, the attack by some trans activists on women’s spirituality reflects a patriarchal attitude.

I think there are three points here particularly relevant for NeoPagans. First, while tribal cultures were as varied, or more so, than all European cultures combined, there was a widespread recognition of more than two genders, although described in different ways. Second, the term

²⁵ Guna Yala: The islands where women make the rules, *BBC Travel*, August 18, 2018.

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20180813-guna-yala-the-islands-where-women-make-the-rules>

²⁶ Sydney Krantz, Guna Yala – A Magical Culture You’ve Never Heard Of, *Roam and Bard*, March 31, 2016. <https://medium.com/run-away/guna-yala-a-culture-you-ve-never-heard-of-a279066903e4>

²⁷ For example: <https://www.sanblasdreams.com/the-guna-region--history.html>

“Two Spirit” differs from most modern definitions of sexuality and gender identity in that it is not primarily a term of personal sexual or gender "identity"; but of a spiritual status. Braboy writes, it is as if “they have two spirits in one body.”²⁸ Third, women’s spirituality is in no way antagonistic to the existence of trans-gendered people, but the two genders are not regarded as identical. Therefore, if there is a place for women’s rituals, it is for biological women to determine who is invited (as it is up to trans women to determine who is invited to a trans women’s ritual).

Braboy explains the English “Two Spirit” was adopted from its Ojibwe equivalent in 1989, to serve as a general English term understandable in all tribes. As such, “it is not always translatable with the same meaning in Native languages. For example, in the Iroquois Cherokee language, there is no way to translate the term, but the Cherokee do have gender variance terms for ‘women who feel like men’ and vice versa.” But for many Native Americans who do not identify as straight, the term is useful.

After I presented this paper, an extraordinarily powerful example of where the term “two spirit” fits better than either man or woman was reported by the respected English newspaper, *The Guardian*. It described Freddy MacDonald’s pride and pleasure in his new son, Jack. But what made Freddy’s pleasure in his son worthy of a newspaper story is that he is a transman. Freddy also gave birth to his son. He is his mother. MacDonald started transitioning at 25, and now, at 32, is a dad and a mother. In the article he described the various changes that happened as he temporarily de-transitioned so he could get pregnant. The term “two spirit” is obviously more accurate than just man or woman.²⁹

At a time when far more attention is given to so-called ‘cultural appropriation’ issues than is warranted, the ‘hybrid’ nature of this term is important.³⁰ “Two Spirit” is a term taken

²⁸ Braboy, op. cit.

²⁹ Simon Hattenstone, The Dad who gave birth: ‘Being pregnant doesn’t change me being a trans man,’ *The Guardian*, April 20, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/20/the-dad-who-gave-birth-pregnant-trans-freddy-mcconnell?utm_term=RWRpdG9yaWFsX0d1YXJkaWFuVG9kYXIVUy0xOTA0MjA%3D&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUS&CMP=GTUS_email&fbclid=IwAR3nMJZIAtp2dzgwrNY3b8s-vmdcriwfyaac5rlS_UjuQmP34JLDxQGEGA8

³⁰ Gus diZerega, Transforming the Cultural Appropriation Debate: Pagan and magickal Insights, *Sept 2, 2017*. <http://www.dizerega.com/2017/09/02/transforming-the-cultural-appropriation-debate-pagan-and-magickal-insights/>

from English to refer to a variety of similar but not identical terms in other languages, relying on the common language of English to unite them. It has no specific cultural meaning across the many tribes that now use it beyond, perhaps, the fact that it carries spiritual rather than, or as well as, a purely sexual or gender significance. This spiritual dimension is important, because arguments over different people's appropriate or inappropriate ritual participation is what divides us.

In a NeoPagan context the term perfectly describes the status of trans people who identify with the biological gender that is the opposite of the one to which they were born. Running through our history and symbolism is the distinction between male and female, God and Goddess. Different Pagan cultures can identify the same manifestation as masculine or feminine - in Shinto the sun is female, for example. But this distinction, based on sexual differentiation and various qualities linked to it, seems a constant.

They quite literally share two spirits, and in many cases have demonstrated such by making one of the most important and culturally uncomfortable decisions of which a human being is capable: transitioning from one gender identification to another. But the transition is never complete. The chromosomes do not change and medical intervention is needed to preserve it. The conflicts surrounding such transitions are so uncomfortable that many subsequently attempt suicide while others are murdered, because there is no respected place for them in society. And, to repeat a point made earlier, there are demonstrable differences in the brains of trans-people as compared to biological men and women, difference that appear to combine elements of both.³¹

The East Asian Yin/Yang concept helps us understand this point a little more deeply. Yin is regarded as feminine and yang a masculine. When we look at a yin/yang symbol, we see a small dot of black where the white most dominates, and a small dot of white where the white dominates. Nothing is 100% yin or yang. But one or the other can dominate, or, elsewhere in the symbol, we find a balance of the two.

I suggest the English term "Two Spirits" as ideal for describing trans-people, but what matters is the distinction, not the word. As memes, once they enter the public arena, words are

³¹ Shawna Williams, Are the Brains of Transgender People Different from Those of Cisgender People? *The Scientist*, March 1, 2018. <https://www.the-scientist.com/features/are-the-brains-of-transgender-people-different-from-those-of-cisgender-people-30027>

alive. This is particularly true for translations, which frequently never perfectly reflect the shades of meaning in the other language. The same is true for “Two Spirit” and the many words it covers in the languages spoken by different tribes. Therefore, I see no problem in adopting it. Just as the term was explicitly adopted by Native Americans, so it might be ideal for Pagans within the trans community to adopt it, or some other inclusive term, for themselves. It is the status, and not the word describing it, that matters.

Many Native Americans have already done the heavy lifting in this regard. Today, I believe no religious community is better situated than we modern Pagans to learn from them, and embrace the full diversity and richness of what it is to be a human being. If something like Two Spirits were accepted, trans-people would have a respected and potentially even *honored* place in the Pagan community, and all three groups, women, men, and Two Spirits, would be free to invite those they felt comfortable with to whatever rituals they wanted, without thereby denigrating anyone else. PantheaCon could have rituals just for trans-Pagans (in fact it is uniquely suited to do so since it draws from such a large population base, and they are thinly spread), as it could for biological men and women. And, of course, many rituals where these gender identities are irrelevant.

Embracing difference

Being different is not a matter of being better or worse. Hierarchical thinking is not necessarily useful in recognizing and responding to differences. It is silly to say Big Sur is better or worse than Yosemite Valley. They are different, and I may prefer one to the other without wondering whether someone else is ‘wrong’ because their preferences are the opposite of mine. If I deeply love one person, that does not mean I disparage other people’s loves for different people as inferior to mine. Closer to this issue, I have never felt that women-only events demean me as a straight male. The same holds for celebrating or honoring any other basic life patterns, whether they include us all, like Samhain, or just some, like a ritual built around the experience of menopause.

In these divisive times, one important side point is necessary to make. My argument does not undermine the case for rejecting rituals based on race or nationality at events such as PantheaCon. Race and nationality are social constructions rather than reflecting basic biological processes. As a young man, Benjamin Franklin once wrote that German immigrants should be

banned from entering the colony of Pennsylvania, among other reasons, because they were mostly not White. They were “swarthy.”³² (Franklin wanted Pennsylvania residency limited to “whites and reds.”) Germans today, and likely every other American, would disagree with Franklin’s divisions. Where lines are drawn have changed, but the justification for them is as weak now as in Franklin’s time.

Secondly, race and nationality-based rituals affirm the supposed superiority of some conceptions of race or people over against others. There is no evidence this is true. Humanity has suffered millions of deaths from such attitudes. My argument does nothing to support such poisonous malarkey.

However, coerced inclusivity that ignores basic differences that matter spiritually and psychologically, destroy what makes spirituality deeply relevant to individuals. And when a spiritual practice does not speak directly to individuals and their experience, it dies. More than other religions, NeoPaganism is rooted in recognizing and honoring these differences. Removing recognizing embodiment in its various ways as sacred will destroy NeoPaganism. We can either learn to honor these differences as the different petals of a divine flower, or wither and destroy the whole thing by arguing amongst ourselves as to whose differences should supplant someone else's.

To summarize this argument

Identification a group as women is always contextual. Sometimes embodiment is the primary determinant. Sometimes life experience is. Sometimes self-identification is.

It is indisputable that women's spirituality focusing on the lived experiences of natal women, their rites for healing and celebration, has a central place in who we are as NeoPagans. How natal women deal with trans-women in terms of women’s spirituality is their business, not mine, and not trans-women’s either. If such a group wants to include trans-women, that is their right, as it is their right to exclude them, every bit as much as it is their right to include or exclude men as their guests. I am told some natal women do, and some do not. Different patterns

³² Benjamin Franklin. Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, 1751. etc., <http://www.columbia.edu/~lmg21/ash3002y/earlyac99/documents/observations.html>

emerge among different women. It should not be an issue of relevance to the broader community.

The current situation of attacking natal women who want to limit certain rituals to women like themselves is deeply destructive to the Pagan community. The largest pan-Pagan gathering on the West Coast has been deeply injured by efforts to compel an arbitrary standard and purge and suppress alternatives. A more natural and respectful approach would be to honor any biological group's decision to honor the cycles and patterns of their embodiment. If, over time, a group decides some differences once regarded as important, have ceased to be so, (perhaps like those 'swarthy' Germans) the formerly excluded will be invited. If this 'works' for all concerned, increasingly what was once regarded as an important difference will disappear. If the distinction survives, it will be because those involved think it matters. But whatever pattern emerges should emerge from people voluntarily doing ritual with those they wish.

"Trans women" are nothing new in our community and they have (so far as I know) always been welcomed, and in some cases become prominent Pagan leaders. But, until recently, sexuality and gender were not political statements in NeoPagan rituals. They were purely personal dimensions of a person's identity. If a formerly male woman impressed other women as one of them in all relevant ways, they were welcome to women's events. In many ways it was like anyone attracted to a group of which they were initially not a member. Respect, courtesy, and friendliness opened doors.

No one questioned women's or men's right to have their own rituals because these distinctions were perceived (quite correctly) as important dimensions of the human experience, and most of us sought to honor all those dimensions. If we did not share them, because we were of a different sex, we did not feel 'discriminated against.' I certainly never did, and I am not invited to *any* women-only event.

One reader of an earlier draft put this point more broadly, NeoPagans have *always* had exclusive rituals – by gender, by Tradition, by Degree, and so on. Perhaps a better approach would be that, at large public events, any "exclusive" rituals focus on what their organizers want the participants to *share*: the experience of being women in modern society (female and trans), having given birth (natal women), having changed gender identity (trans) and so on.

Getting Personal- a final comment

Some trans-friendly natal women have been troubled by my argument, thinking it demeans trans people's experiences in some way. I honestly cannot understand why they think so, but they do. So, let me offer a personal case of why I think their criticism is misdirected.

I have a very good trans-man friend whom in every respect I treat as a man, although when he speaks about women I listen particularly closely because, unlike natal men, he has a direct experience of what it is to be female. But other than that, in my life he is a he. If we were in a circle and he wanted to be high priest, I would have no trouble with that.

Let's suppose I was asked to develop an initiation ritual for young men entering into adulthood. I would not invite him, because he has not had the experiences these young men have had. But suppose he asked me whether he might attend, so as to gain more insight into this dimension of male life, or just out of respect and support for those attending (perhaps including a young friend of his). Or perhaps he helped do some of the work putting it together, or otherwise evidenced a positive interest in it.

Assuming others involved in doing the ritual had no problems, if he asked, I would immediately say "yes." I might even make the offer on my own. He would be an *honored guest*. The key word is *honored*. He would not be there by right, but because he had demonstrated qualities, including respect for our ritual, that would make him welcome among us. We would honor him by inviting him. He is different, but his difference is worthy of honoring.

By comparison, if a trans-man demanded to attend because he was a man in all relevant ways, I would say "No." If he denied the legitimacy of male rituals because people like himself were excluded, my "No" would be accompanied by a demand he mind his own business. It was no concern of his what we did.

Upon reading an earlier version of this, a Pagan who for years has been deeply active in interfaith activities with indigenous peoples wrote that he and those with whom he works "have always respected the differences between us and the indigenous people with whom we work. We share indigenous spirituality, but we are not indigenous people. We have never assumed that we would be included in a group or meeting or ritual. As a result of that respect, we have *always* been invited to participate." Respect works. Demands do not.

Being different is not being better or worse. Being an honored guest involves being recognized as a person of worth and value *while simultaneously recognizing their difference*.

That is why they are guests. This is the language of respect and regard, not of rights and demands, and this language is what is appropriate for our religion.

My trans-man friend likes the term “Two Spirits” for himself.