***Content Note:*** *This article is not explicit, but it acknowledges the existence of consensual sex. There are also some mentions of language that can be hurtful and triggering to some.*

 Quakers have historically been on the forefront of civil rights issues dating back to abolition of slavery and prison reform movements. When it comes to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) concerns, we are, as a Society, experiencing growing pains and transition. Some Friends are struggling with the idea of rethinking and broadening their concept of marriage, and other Friends hear about “preferred gender pronouns” and the use of “they” as a singular pronoun and squint their eyebrows with skepticism. Queer and trans-identified Friends and allies in many circles are frustrated at feeling overlooked and denied by their communities when some Quakers don’t use people’s correct names or pronouns.

 It is not uncommon for folks to have lived entire lives without bumping into any of this trans or queer stuff. And that’s okay! But gender fluidity and breaking out of the male/female gender binary is nothing new. Cultures around the world have had names for transgender people for a long, long time, from the Zapotec Muxes of Oaxaca, Mexico to the Hijras of South Asia (look up “third gender” to find more fascinating examples). With the advent of visible transgender celebrities like Chelsea Manning, Laverne Cox, and Caitlyn Jenner, Western society is starting to catch up in its understanding of the wide world of gender.

Let’s take a moment to name some key terms that trans and queer folks have found helpful in understanding their identities. It’s important to remember that language evolves over time; just because a word used to be acceptable doesn’t mean that it is now, and some of these words may become problematic or obsolete in time.

* **Transgender** (or just ‘trans’): The ‘T’ in LGBTQ. Having a gender that is different from the one you were assigned at birth. Can relate to MTF (male-to-female), FTM (female-to-male), or trans identities outside of the male/female binary. Being transgender does not necessarily mean that someone has undergone surgery, which can be expensive and/or undesired. A person’s body is not necessarily connected to their gender.
* **Cisgender** (or just ‘cis’): Having a gender that is the same as the one you were assigned at birth.
* **Genderqueer:** identifying as a gender other than male or female. Some people call this ‘nonbinary.’ Some people identify as no gender, or ‘agender,’ while others’ gender shifts over time (‘genderfluid’).
* **Gender Identity** (or just ‘gender’): The inner perception of one’s gender, which may not have any connection to one’s biological sex.
* **Gender Expression:** the clothing, fashion choices, voice, and other visual/body characteristics that an individual chooses to express. This may not have anything to do with someone’s gender identity. Just because someone wears dresses and makeup does not mean that you can assume that that person is a woman or uses she/her/hers pronouns.
* **Pronouns** (e.g., “what are your pronouns?”)**:** The singular pronouns that best fit with a person’s gender. Examples include he/him/his, she/her/hers, and they/them/theirs. A person’s pronouns may change over time, so it’s important to ask people for pronouns in introductory settings or write them on nametags.
* **They/Them/Theirs:** A popular non-male, non-female singular gender pronoun. Language and grammar evolve over time: many major news publications like the New York Times have endorsed the use of ‘they’ to refer to a single person, and people have been using it for ages (e.g.: “I found a pair of glasses, did someone lose their glasses? I hope they come forward and claim these.”) There are other non-binary pronouns (like ze/zim/zir), but the singular they is probably the most popular.
* **Lesbian:** The ‘L’ in LGBTQ. A person who self-identifies as female who experiences attraction primarily to other people who self-identify as female.
* **Gay:** The ‘G’ in LGBTQ. A person who experiences attraction primarily to people of the same gender identity. Often used for people who self-identify as male.
* **Bisexual:** The ‘B’ in LGBTQ. Though often traditionally used to indicate someone who experiences attraction to both male and female people, more recently it has been repurposed by some to indicate attraction to those with the *same* gender identity as well as those with a *different* gender identity, to be more inclusive of non-binary folks. Some prefer **Pansexual**, since “pan” comes from the Greek word for “all, every.”
* **Queer:** The ‘Q’ in LGBTQ. an umbrella term that can be used to describe anyone who experiences romantic or sexual attraction or gender identity in a non-standard way. Some might simplify it to being anything other than straight or cisgender. The word was once used widely as a slur, but has been widely reclaimed by sexuality and gender activists. Be careful with its usage: some folks, particularly older LGBT folks, might have some bad memories associated with it.
* **Polyamorous** (or just ‘poly’): A person who experiences romantic love for more than one person and/or who wishes to be in a consenting, non-monogamous relationship. This is not someone who is rationalizing infidelity, but rather someone who discusses clearly with their partner(s) about navigating non-monogamous love and attraction with mutual consent. All parties are consenting participants who have equal say, rather than the unequal power dynamic that can come with a man who seeks multiple wives. Note that polyamorous people may be straight and cisgender.
* **Asexual:** Someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Does not necessarily mean that the person does not experience romantic attraction or desire partnership.
* **Aromantic:** Someone who does not experience romantic attraction. Does not necessarily mean that the person does not experience or act upon sexual attraction.
* **Questioning:** Someone who is in the process of seeking clarity about their sexuality and/or gender.

Words & phrases you should avoid (they are largely considered to be inappropriate and hurtful):

* **Transsexual** (instead, use *transgender*)
* **Transvestite** (instead, use *cross-dresser, drag queen/king,* or just avoid labelling someone who dresses differently than you’d expect them to)
* **Transgendered, or transgender as a noun** (example: “so-and-so is transgendered” or “so-and-so is a transgender” are both not well-received)
* **Hermaphrodite** (instead, use *intersex.* About 1 in 20 people are born intersex, which means having nontraditional genitalia).
* **It** (this compares a person to an animal or an object, and nobody really likes that. How would you like to be called the same pronoun as a desk lamp?)
* **“What are you?”** (answer: a human being, like all of the rest of us. This sends the message that trans/queer folks are alien or aberrant)
* **“When did/will you get the surgery?”** (it’s none of your business unless they bring it up first, and some people never get sex reassignment surgery, by choice or by circumstance, and that’s OK. They’re still entitled to be referred to by their correct name and pronoun)
* **“What’s in your pants?”** (again, it’s really none of your business. Would you ask this question of someone who wasn’t trans?)
* **“Ah, I get it, you were just born into the wrong body.”** (this may not be the case for a lot of trans people. Sometimes, your physical characteristics don’t have much to do with your gender or expression).

*This is surely an incomplete list, feel free to do some research of your own. Call me out if you feel like I’ve represented something wrong.*

**But what’s the point?**

The Society of Friends was founded upon the central belief that there is that of God in all people, no exceptions. It’s irrefutable that Friends ought to treat one another with respect no matter what identities we claim. The most loving thing that we can do for the trans and queer people in our lives is to take their word for it and use the names and pronouns that they tell us to use. By saying things like “well, what’s your *real* name?” and “I’m just going to call you ‘she’ (or ‘he’) because ‘they’ is too hard to remember,” we are erasing details of someone’s identity that are essential to who they are. It’s similar to the hurtful statement “I don’t see race,” which sends the message that you are ignoring a fundamental piece of someone’s identity. We do our best to pronounce names correctly because it is a sign of respect for one another. Working hard to use the correct names and pronouns—even if we’re not used to it—sends the message that we care about each other and we respect each other as having that of God inside us without exception. In a world where queer and trans people are told by so many groups that they are going to hell or that they are abnormal and repulsive, we as Quakers have the wonderful opportunity to counteract those messages with a message of love and inclusion. Here are some concrete things we can do to further that goal:

* If a Friend comes out to you as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, respond with kindness, compassion, and an open, accepting mind. Coming out is an act of great bravery and respect, and it shows that this person trusts you enough to lay themselves bare and vulnerable. Respond by asking how you can help them, and what you can do to respect this part of them. Trust and use the name and pronouns that you are told to use. It’s not up to you to tell someone else how they should feel or identify.
* Write your pronouns on your nametag at Meeting for Worship and other gatherings of Friends. It may seem obvious to you, but it’s better to encourage an atmosphere where gender is not assumed based on appearance.
* If you mess up on someone’s name or pronouns, apologize and move on. It’s normal and acceptable to make mistakes, but it derails and distracts from more important work if too much time is spent apologizing and assuring your peers that you are trying your best to be an ally.
* Fight for access to degendered bathrooms. The Senior Young Friends led this charge at Intermountain Yearly Meeting a long time ago. Many trans people and folks who break the gender norms of their expected presentation have a very legitimate fear of being harassed or threatened by people who think that they’re in the wrong bathroom (this happens, sadly, quite often). Are there accessible gender-neutral bathrooms in your meeinghouse? What about the sites of gatherings, such as Intermountain Yearly Meeting’s annual session in June?

**Where I’m coming from**

I am a queer, cisgender male, which (for me) means that I am attracted to people of all genders and I identify as the gender I was assigned at birth, which is male. I use he/him/his pronouns. I am by no means an expert when it comes to gender and sexuality, but I did spend a good deal of time in gender and sexuality affinity groups in college and I worship with the Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC) whenever I get the chance. Throughout my journey, I’ve had the pleasure and privilege of talking to and hearing from a great number of extremely intelligent and well-informed people on issues of gender and sexuality, including Robyn Ochs, Laverne Cox, Danielle Owens-Reid and Kristin Russo, Dan Savage, Kody Gabriel Hersh, evalyn parry, and Peterson Toscano. The last three names on that list are all practicing Friends, and Peterson does some excellent and fascinating work on gender-nonconformity in the Bible. Because I am no expert, I am sure that I have said some things that are wrong or offensive to some. I welcome and encourage you to reach out to me and let me know if you have questions or corrections or if you wish to challenge me on something I’ve said. Please feel free to send me a note at dmotzstorey@gmail.com.

 With love, light, and gratitude for your time,

Damon Motz-Storey