

The Divine Call to Be Myself: Anglican Transgender Women and Prayer

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*I prayed frequently to have this desire taken away
or to wake up as a girl, but each morning I'd wake up
and nothing would have changed. — Hope*

These are the words of an English Anglican transgender (often shortened to “trans”) woman talking about her prayer life as a child. They are words which echo the prayers many of us remember from our own childhoods: prayers that God would change things to make us happy, that we would wake up prettier or more popular or with a pony waiting in the garden. But they are words which also bear a depth of dis-ease with one’s own self that is particular to those who were assigned a gender at birth, based on their embodiment, which does not reflect the gender they know themselves to be.

I know something from my own experience (limited though such experience is by my own race and class and gender identity as a white, middle-class, straight cisgender¹ woman), as well as from my life as a priest and from my academic studies, of what it means to pray as a woman. What I know little of is what it is like to pray as part of the journey from living as a man in the eyes of others to becoming the woman one knows oneself to be. In order to learn more I have talked in person, via Skype, and by email with six Anglican trans women from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States who generously shared with me the way that their journey of transition affected and was affected by their prayer journeys.²

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¹ “Cisgender,” often shortened to “cis,” is the term for people whose gender identity is consistent with the gender assigned to them at birth.

² These women will be referred to by their first names, which have been changed for those who requested greater anonymity.

These conversations were rich and wide-ranging. Each woman's journey, both spiritual and physical, was unique to her, and there was no one way of praying as a trans Anglican woman that was common to all. However, there were a number of themes that I believe speak to all of us in their call for authenticity and openness as essential components of our relationship with God in prayer.

One of these themes is *honesty*. Tina, a priest in the Church of England, spoke about the deadening effect not being able to be herself had on her spiritual life: "Secrecy—it is the secrecy that's such a problem and leads to so much pain—so much spiritual pain." The women expressed that the secrecy with which their own identity was shrouded in their life in the world had a considerable impact on how honest and open their prayer life could be. This is not to say that prayer wasn't happening; Tina, for instance, has had a regular discipline of prayer that fed and grounded her from long before her transition. Yet for many women there was something constrained, something partial about their prayer: in Tina's words again, "I wasn't a complete person for a long time, not firing on all cylinders. Part of me was at home and part of me was away."

Tina spoke of the harm of secrecy, and Robyn, a lay woman in the Church of England, spoke of the delights of eventual honesty in prayer, as well as in life in general. Her prayer life expanded after she had moved into transition: "And that was the point at which I could then be honest with myself and then be honest with God. That was really the point at which transition and my faith blossomed together. One could not happen without the other. So both of them have grown exponentially alongside each other." Robyn's newfound integration of her inner and outer realities—of her knowledge of herself as a woman and living as a woman—brought about a profound shift in her ability to pray. She could now bring her full self into her life of prayer, feeling confident for the first time that God would accept her for who she is and would call her as a true follower of Christ: "That was the point at which I really thought, I can actually now come before God and be open before God and be sure of my place that is given to me. I could follow Jesus. I'm not hiding anything now, not holding anything back."

Along with a newfound honesty in prayer a number of the women spoke about a new spaciousness and a sense of peace. This was how Rebecca, a Canadian lay Anglican, spoke of the stillness that she found within herself one morning not long after she had started hormone therapy: "One morning I woke up realizing that I was just still inside,

that I was calm. I didn't know that I had been filled with motion." This new peace within herself soon made a profound difference to her prayer life and to her relationship with God: "The best way I can describe what was going on before was that I was always walking up and down inside of myself. I was never at rest, always walking, walking, pacing, pacing. And Jesus said, now that you can sit down there's room for me to sit with you. And so then Jesus sat down with me."

Rebecca found an inner stillness that was only possible because of a new integrity between who she knew herself to be and who she was allowing herself to become. She no longer had to pace back and forth between two conflicting realities—an outer male persona and an inner female identity—but could relax into a new truth where the two realities became one. Robyn put this same process in even more dramatic terms, speaking of the end of a war within herself: "I lived with aggression and pain and anger for years and years and years. So to have that war, that inner turmoil, cease—it really was like the war was now over. I could climb out of my trench and put my hands up in surrender. And it has peace. All that emotional energy was taken up trying to hold the tide back." Spiritual life could not flourish for Rebecca or Robyn until there was space inside themselves for prayer to find a home, and peace inside themselves so that energy could be directed to God rather than to the struggle for true identity within.

This is hopeful, not only for trans women but for all of us—the sense that the more we live into honesty and integration within our own lives the more open and profound our prayer life may become. But, as all of us who pray know, this is only part of the story. Rachel, a Church of England priest who writes in books and blogs with compelling insight and depth about her gender journey as well as her life with a chronic illness,³ speaks to the pain that honest prayer can also bring: "The phrase I use in *Dazzling Darkness* is the broken middle. It's a place of being caught between, and it's a creative place, and actually it's the place where I think Christ is. And I've always been drawn to that image in prayer and in theology of the risen Christ still bearing the marks of crucifixion."

Prayer at the depths is a place of encounter with God which can mean an influx of peace, but it can also mean being exposed to an energy

³ I highly recommend Rachel Mann's book, *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2012).

that challenges and grates more than it comforts and soothes. Rachel talks about “having been in that place of encounter and exposure in quite a startling, terrifying way when I said to God, ‘If you are there, I am yours.’” Yet, even when the encounter is not all peace and light there is still a sense that it reaches new depths because of the internal wholeness of the person praying: a new ability to give oneself fully to the encounter because the self is no longer so profoundly splintered.

The God whom the women encountered wore different faces for many of them at different points of their journey. Hope speaks of God as she knew him before her transition as “a distant judge who I could ask for favours but who would only answer prayers if I was perfect, which I never was. Generally I felt like a pervert who wanted to love God, but knew I would never be acceptable. It was a bit like being a moth attracted to flame. I was seeking acceptance and affirmation but it was as if hidden behind a pane of glass, forever out of reach.”

A number of the women have a common perception of God as judgmental or distant or cruel in the years before they transitioned—especially during childhood and adolescence. God failed to answer their most basic and persistent prayer either to wake up as a girl or to become comfortable with the body in which they lived. Some felt that their life was a sick joke imposed on them by a cruel creator. This anger and dissatisfaction and discomfort with the self was projected onto the God responsible for their predicament. Not surprisingly, this caused some of the women to walk away from prayer completely for a number of years, until they were able to encounter a God characterized by love rather than by rejection.

Not all women experienced God as a cruel judge. Elena, an American Episcopal priest, speaks of the relief she found as a five-year-old in discovering her own image and language of God. She was brought up in a fundamentalist Christian faith by her adoptive parents, but did not find their image of God one that spoke to her childhood reality. One night, when her parents were having a loud fight, Elena went into her room and prayed a new prayer: “I prayed, ‘Dear heavenly Mother, if you can hear me please make the fighting stop. The heavenly Father isn’t hearing me.’ Immediately the house went silent. And in that moment I was convinced that there is a heavenly Mother too.” For Elena this heavenly Mother has continued to be part of her prayer experience; she speaks of “bugging Jesus and Mother” to change her, and also of her profound prayers of gratitude to them when her transition was accomplished.

While Father still worked as an image and name for God for most of the women, rooted as they are in the liturgy of the Anglican Church, others spoke of using female divine language in their prayers. Rebecca speaks movingly of coming to experience God as mother: “When things are at their worst—because sometimes things are still really bad—my prayer is always prayer in bed and weeping just ‘Mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy.’ And that’s a prayer.” Rebecca’s language of prayer has moved from that of Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer*, which she experienced and valued as a child, to that of the *Book of Alternative Services*, and now to something which is intensely personal and meaningful for her. Like the other women she has found enough elasticity within her Anglican practice to allow for this development within her own prayer life, never feeling forced into a position of having to choose between her communal and her private expressions of prayer. Trans Anglican lay and ordained women, just like cis Anglican lay and ordained women, are able to hold together a common liturgical language and an intensely personal—and sometimes radically different—language of prayer. Which is also, no doubt, true for many male Anglicans!

These women practice prayer in a wide variety of ways: from saying the daily offices, to dance, to silent meditation, to walking in nature, to meditating on Bible stories. They are aware that prayer embraces others as well as themselves. For some this became clearer as the urgency of their own needs began to recede, leaving a space carved out by their own suffering from which they could pray with painful empathy for the needs of others. Many of them also spoke of their awareness of the pain that their need to transition had caused the people they loved and cared for, especially when there were partners and children in their lives. These pains became part of their own prayer lives, a place in which love could be expressed without the complications of the face-to-face realities of renegotiating relationships and reassembling a new future.

In such intercessory prayer it was also possible to find a new release into God’s love in a way that praying only for the self did not always allow. For Hope, bringing the needs of others into her prayer opened up a new response from God that enabled her own self-acceptance: “As soon as my attention goes to others with love in prayer, it feels like God always answers with an overflowing response that drowns me in love and self-acceptance. It’s impossible for me to doubt my loved-ness when this happens. Even when some Christians

try to tell me that LGBT people are more deeply alienated from God because we won't repent, my experience in prayer is that we are utterly immersed in God's love."

Being "utterly immersed in God's love" is as wonderful a description of prayer as any I know, and the perfect antidote for the sense of shame that haunted some of the women in their pre-transition lives—and which continued to be wished on them by some Christians (and many members of society in general) during and after their transition. Prayer allowed a relationship with One who cared completely for their good and welcomed them with open arms. And it was good to hear of times when the local parish embodied that welcoming love. Robyn, for instance, spoke of her local church as a welcoming space where love and friendship was offered. However, there were also sad instances when the church was a barrier to rather than a path to prayer, as Tina experienced: "What I didn't say earlier was the horrors of that transition with the third parties did wreck my prayer life for a while. It really did wreck it."

Many of the women had to negotiate, in their spiritual as well as in their emotional lives, a sense of guilt that came with the decision to transition. This was different from the shame experienced before their transition—a time when the pain was their own as they experienced the dissonance between their inner self and their external lives. This guilt was caused by other's pain, as other lives were affected by a decision to transition. One part of prayer that helped at this stage was a belief that the decision for transition did not only serve the will of the person making it, but also served the will of God. As Rebecca says, as part of her prayerful reflection on Psalm 139, "If God knew me in the womb then God has always been calling me to this."

I have kept my own reflections to the end, so that the words of the trans women form their own impression on the reader. I hope that they have provoked a variety of reactions and found points of resonance with readers' own spiritual journeys. I will conclude by turning a Trinitarian lens on these conversations, with the hope that it will open up further reflection on the spiritual and theological significance of these women's experiences. Remember again that I speak as an outsider to these experiences, bringing inevitably my own cis-gendered worldview with me as I write.

It is notable, first of all, how personal the relationship is between these women and God. The language they use of God differs between paternal and maternal, but it remains constantly within a

relational, and primarily parental, context. Their discomfort with their own bodily reality does not lead them to seek more abstract terms for God; they do not speak of finding comfort in reflecting on the un-bodied nature of the divine or in using depersonalized language such as Creator or Holy One. Instead, it seems that their profoundly embodied journey leads to a comfort with a God imaged through human bodily reality.

This observation has implications for the language we use in Anglican liturgies and prayers. Sometimes it seems that our desire to be as inclusive and inoffensive as possible leads us to forego more embodied language in favor of the functional or non-personal. I know that I myself have chosen to use many blessings which feature “Creator, Redeemer, and Friend” in order to find language that does not favor one gender or exclude those whose gender is in transition or defined as non-binary. However, this language empties out the passionate and personal relationship with the divine that comes through in listening to many of the Anglican trans women. In being empty of offense it may also be empty of the spiritual and theological reality that it is trying to impart. My own practice, as a result of these conversations, is to vary between “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and “Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit” in order to honor the depth of personal relationship that these spiritual journeys exemplify. Our language for God will always fall far short of divine reality, but we need to continue to wrestle to keep it consonant with human experience.

My conversations with these women have also led me to reflect on my understanding of incarnation: of the way that Jesus Christ embodied God, but also of the way that all of us embody God. It is impossible for us to know the level of ease or dis-ease that Jesus had with his own body, whether it felt like home or like exile to be the man from Nazareth. But we do know—and I think it is one of the gifts of Anglicanism that we keep this in the forefront of our theology—that bodies are capable of being home to God and that bodies are of worth and value to God. This means that we cannot disconnect the physical journey of these women from their spiritual journey. It is the whole person, body and soul, who is in relationship with the God who chose to become embodied and to live with us.

It is very clear from the testimony of many of these women that their faith only became fully open to them when they were fully real to themselves: when their own incarnation began to reflect their own self-understanding. In the first lines of a prayer poem by Rebecca:

My body is now a temple.
My body is now a place of stillness.
My body is now a dwelling place.

It is easier for those of us who are cis and also currently able-bodied to ignore our physical reality in our spiritual practice and allow ourselves to become disembodied in our own prayer lives. But this is to lose a core connection with a central tenet of our faith: that God became human so that we might become divine. Our spirituality needs to embrace our bodies as well as our souls, so that the whole person can be caught up in God's transformative love.

How is the Holy Spirit at work in these women's lives, and in the new focus on trans rights more generally? We can see how their transition allows these women to become the people they believe they were created to be. For them, the Spirit is at work through the many processes (which include but are not limited to medical processes) through which they reconcile their authentic gender with their bodies. The Spirit is at work within creation, re-creating us into our true identity as God's children when we open ourselves to that Holy presence within us. Bodies as well as souls are being transformed in these journeys to allow an integration of the whole being in relationship with God and with others.

Like much spiritual change, this transformation does not come without a cost. The women themselves bear the cost, as they face the pain of disrupting settled relationships as well as the scorn of some members of the wider society. Pain is also borne by former wives and by children who find their own lives caught up in a change that is not of their choosing. The pain cannot be truly said to be a result of the transitioning itself, but of the fact that transitioning has been so taboo that trans women have tried to establish an alternative life for themselves rather than embracing the reality of their own being. For all these women the knowledge of discomfort with their gender was an early realization that with better education, understanding, and counseling could have been addressed before adult relationships were forged. These taboos contribute to the present pain that many families of persons in transition feel as they too are caught up in the wrongful shame that society can project on to such transitions. Accepting transition as a life passage that is neither sinful nor shameful would help relieve at least some of this unhappiness. It can be seen as a further action of the Holy Spirit that such taboos are beginning to

be brought down, and we can hope that gender transitions come with less pain for all in the years to come.

In further research, I would like to explore how a sense of self-integration or self-alienation plays into our ability to pray. Is self-integration essential to allow our full being to be present to God in prayer, as some of the women's experiences suggest, or can the painful gap in self-alienation be an opening for the work of the Spirit? An exploration of how trans identity influences our ideas of being created in the image of God would challenge us to get beyond the language of a binary male/female creation and to see our bodies as "strangely and wonderfully made," whether they conform to "the norm" or transgress it. What might the sense of being "wrongly created" play into one's relationship with the Creator? Finally, I would love to see more thought and creativity brought to the task of building prayer forms and liturgies which enable us to confront and express the depth of alienation from self and God that can be a necessary part of our spiritual journey—the wilderness which strips us bare until we see ourselves for who we truly are and know God to be at the center of our being, however fractured that being may be.

For these six Anglican trans women both the transition and the prayer are part of their deepest identity as they live into their calling to be beloved daughters of God, sisters and fellow-workers with Christ, people breathed through by the Holy Spirit. Each of their prayer journeys is unique, but each is also part of the prayer-identity of the Anglican Church as a whole. There is great richness for us if we can take the time to listen to these voices and learn from them more about the way God works through each person's unique relationship with the ground of their being.

