

In each of our lives if we are lucky we get at least one teacher who is memorable to us. That person taught us more than a subject, more than English more than math more than history. More than likely they are memorable because they were passionate about what they knew, they taught you something about what it is to be human, and they probably taught you that you are worthy.

Mr. Reeves is that teacher for me. He was my high school English teacher. A Quaker raised in Pennsylvania - the heart of Quaker America at least according to him- who somehow ended up in California. I was lucky enough to be his teaching assistant for a year. Every once in a while, he would refer to me with thee as in "Thee best not be late to class tomorrow." At the time I thought he was making some kind of weird old person joke that I did not get. It was not until I went to Quaker college that I learned for a Quaker or Friend to refer to me as Thee was an honor. He was trying to communicate to me that I was in his inner circle because typically Friends who use plain speech as it is known tend to use it only with other Friends.

The Friends use of plain English comes from 17th century English where in the second person, a distinction was made between the singular thee and the plural you. The usage would be something like this: I might turn to Marty and say "Would thee hand me a hymnal?" But I would say to the gathered folks in this sanctuary "Will you please stand for our hymn." We have lost the distinction in modern English and use the plural You for a single person or for a group. Unless of course you follow southern protocol and use y'all.

Trust Beyond the Binary -You may wonder where am I going to go with this one -well I am going to talk a little about pronouns and our use of them and how we can welcome or not welcome folks with our language

Trust is trickier than it seems. I, and Marty can preach about trust, we can suggest what you might trust and what you might not trust but ultimately nothing we preach will make you trust. Trust cannot be forced. It is rather something that each of us must practice and it highly influenced by the life that you or I have had.

As many of you know yesterday we had our third annual Building Beloved Community Beyond the Binary conference. Over 100 people attended the majority were not from this congregation. We connected with community way beyond these walls of ours. It was a wonderful thing. It was a day when we were able to welcome in a wide-ranging group of folks. What a lovely thing that was to be part of. People were open curious, trusting, learning, connecting. It was wonderful.

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One of the things that we did was give people an opportunity to put their pronouns on their name tag.

For those of us who are part of the dominant cisgender culture this might unnecessary or worse just trendy. Cisgender is a term that describes a person for whom the biological body that they are born with matches the gender that society assigns them and the gender that they feel. Most often for cisgender folk pronouns are a non-issue. But when the beautiful body that you have been given does not somehow feel like it is the gender that people keep trying to tell you that are then pronouns are a big deal. If someone says to me I would like you to use the pronoun they when referring to me and I don't honor their request I am telling that person they are not important to me, they do not matter, and I erase their humanity.

For some of us here this is old news. I know my children adjust names and pronouns so much more easily than I do. And for some of us we still really struggle with shifting pronouns.

I have a pet theory that may or may not be true that in our American Western culture a binary way of seeing gender gets put in our brains when we are really young, at least for a majority of people

It sets us up to see the world, not just gender, in binary terms in either ors and in fact our brains, or at least part of our brain is set up that way.

One fairly common theory of the human brain is that it has three major parts that evolved over time. The first is what is often called our reptilian or primal brain. It is located deep inside our brain really at the brainstem. It is called the reptilian brain because we mammals share it with the snakes and crocodiles and lizards of this world. "The primal brain is ... in charge of, what are often referred to as, the four Fs: Feeding, Fighting, Fleeing, and... Reproduction (well, we won't use that other f-word here!). Notable behavior patterns include defense of self, family, and personal property, physical communication, and socially approved actions, such as handshakes, head nods, and bowing." <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/our-three-brains-the-reptilian-brain> This is the brain that really sees the world in either ors - predator or prey friend or foe

The second evolution of the brain is the mammalian brain or the Limbic system. We share this brain with other mammals but not with reptiles. It is wrapped around our Lizard brain it includes the amygdala and the hippocampus. It is what allows us to have feelings and memories. we feel things, we feel happy, or sad, we feel dread or relief. And we can remember the feelings.

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And the third evolution of our brain is the Neocortex or the thinking brain. This third evolution wraps around the second evolution. So, you can imagine that these three parts of our brain are nested one inside the other. The Neocortex is our language logic and reasoning center. It is what allows us to think the big thoughts and plan ahead. We share this brain with other primates like apes and chimpanzees and also dolphins and some whales.

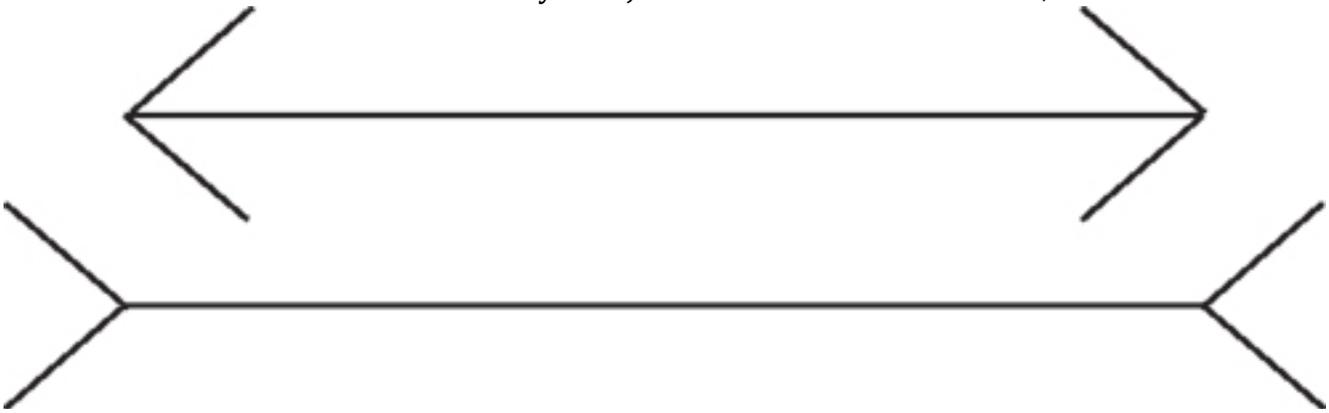
When our experience of the world is not what we expect it to be our brains can react defensively especially or lizard brain. It is not particularly curious or flexible or open to new patterns. Its way of perceiving is set early and is mediated by the limbic system and the neocortex which is what allows us to not be lizards all the time.

What we experience what we are taught at an early age has a huge influence on how our brain develops how we perceive the world what we expect how we sift out data and decide what is important to notice and what it not. In general, in our American Western culture we tend to value Brain three the neocortex over the other two. In our UU tradition there is a strong history of valuing how we think and a kind of New England value of not getting too emotional. If we stay in the realm of the neo cortex we are safe.

All the parts of the brain also good. Its real strength is when the parts are working together.

But each of tends to believe that the way we experience things is the only way to experience them. On an individual level this expresses itself as my normal must be THE normal. And on a collective level our understood normal must be THE understood collective normal. But researchers have been able to show that culture shapes our brains and our perceptions just as our brains shape culture.

A study was done where people from different cultures with vision were this optical illusion called the Mueller-Lyer illusion. For those of you who cannot see this from your seat there are two horizontal lines of the same length. One has arrowheads pointing out on either end and one has arrowheads point in on either end.



People who grow up in environments with buildings and corners, more often fell for the Müller–Lyer illusion – that is, they thought that the bottom line was longer than the top line, compared to people from cultures who live in round huts and tents or who live in the rain forest [3]. [3] ↑ Segall, M. H., Campbell, D. T., and Herskovits, M. J. 1966. *The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception*. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

Our cultures shape our perceptions. Just as our perceptions shape our culture.

If I learn something at a very young age it becomes a foundational piece of how I identify or how I see the world.

In our culture gender is something that is learned at a very early age and it is something that our culture has a deep investment in. In an article from Psychology today entitled *Has Gender Always Been Binary?* The authors note “The gender binary is such a prevalent and well-accepted concept within our society that we tend to get upset when we are unable to place something or someone into one box or the other. We even extend this binary to our [pets](#), often getting upset if people mistake our handsome boy dog for a girl, quickly correcting the offending stranger by emphasizing our response to “Ohhhh what a cute little puppy, what is her name?” with “*His* name is Buddy!” This isn't to say that there is no such thing as a male dog or a female dog, but rather, it emphasizes our cultural investment in perceiving someone's (or some dog's) gender correctly and using that piece of information as an overarching tool through which to understand the person or dog that we have just encountered.” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inclusive-insight/201809/has-gender-always-been-binary>

We here in the west in America generally are told there are 2 genders - we hold onto that with a tightness, don't we? Some folks get uncomfortable and some get really upset if they are confronted with more than 2 genders. I think much of that upset is that the primal brain is being activated.

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And that question is it a boy or a girl? Seems so important to our culture. And almost invisible to us who are cisgender. With the advent of genetic testing and amniocentesis folks know the gender of their future children before birth. Gender reveal parties have come to be fairly common. And yet other qualities are not revealed. A while ago I did the 23andme genetic testing. I have a more Neanderthal variants than 59% of the 23andMe customers. No one I know has a Neanderthal reveal party

In our culture a binary gender has this place of primary importance. So important is it that we tend to think that that is a basic absolute human experience and yet it is not. Our understanding must be the understanding There are many, many cultures across the world that have more than two genders. But our thinking neo cortex tends to dismiss those because they are not white and western.

And I think, and this is the one that is hard to us to admit, sometimes we who are cisgender get our lizard brains activated by someone who does not easily fall into our binary cisgender categories. That brain that wants to know immediately are you food or prey, friend or foe, enemy or future reproductive partner gets upset agitated when someone does not easily fall into our categories.

We UUs we are comfortable with a variety of beliefs and concepts about God or the divine - you can believe that god walked on this earth once, you can believe that all of nature is the divine, you can believe in nothing, you can believe that love is divine force in this universe and on and on. We can accept a plethora of understandings about something so primal so important to folks but when it comes to gender we are a bounded by our western American culture as many.

I hear "the they pronouns is confusing", she looks like a girl why doesn't she use she? He looks like guy to me why doesn't he just use he wouldn't that be easier anyway.

We would never say She looks like a Mary to me I don't know why she uses that name Jane.

And for folks who think they is confusing as a singular and plural pronoun, so were our ancestors in the 1700s they evolved so can we.

I've talked at length, and probably with many inaccuracies, about the human brain and how it both limits us and how it opens us up to vast possibilities.

It seems to me that each evolvment of the brain opened us up to something larger. When animals have only the reptilian brain they are quite functional but they exist at the level of Feeding, Fighting, Fleeing, and... Reproduction. When the mammalian brain evolved emotions, and memory came into being. This allowed animals to band together into groupings, or small communities, emotional allegiances came into being. Attraction was no longer just sexual it included emotions too. And when the

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neocortex, the thinking brain evolved language reasoning planning dreaming Love was added to the world.

If we stay with only the lizard brain we make decisions based on survival, and those are decisions made mostly out of fear. Will you eat me or should I eat you? Can you prevent me from getting my DNA out into the world or can you help? It is very either or thinking. That is helpful for survival but it has its limits

If we stay with only the lizard brain and the mammalian brain we move a bit beyond survival and move into does this feel good, can I repeat it but I think those animals are still pretty reactive. The question may not just be friend or foe but may also be can we make an allegiance or not.. But it is still very either or thinking.

Expanding your pronoun binary might be hard and it might feel awkward, you might be afraid you will do it wrong, but I think that if we really work at expanding the binary in our brains it expands more than our language. It expands our neocortex if you will.

Expanding the binary allows us to expand our welcome we move from you fit or you don't fit my categories to tell me about yourself. Let me know you in your fullness.

When our reptilian, lizard brain looks at another person's outside and decides you are male you are female we shut ourselves off from a moment of profound welcome. When we can trust our limbic system, the one that feels drawn to other people feels the need for connection and community, then our limbic system can tell our lizard brain it's OK I got this you don't need to activate go lay in the sun for a while. When our limbic system is allowed to follow its need for connection then it can speak to our neocortex and say it's OK stay open don't get judgey follow your welcoming curiosity then our limbic system can inform our neocortex here is someone to meet, here is a chance for curiosity, connection, learning grace. So, go ahead just say hi I'm Jennifer I use she her pronouns how nice to meet you.

What happens when we trust ourselves enough to trust the other to be just who they are - we create a moment when we can show someone they are worthy, we create a moment when we show ourselves that we are worthy, we create moment when we can be just who we are, we create a moment of authenticity, we create Beloved community, we create a moment of love, when we expand the binary ...