

Making It Better, Now!

*A Kit for Addressing Homophobic and Transphobic
Bullying and Creating Safe Space for All*



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Is SO Yesterday**

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*Produced by the Affirming Ministry Committee
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Making it Better, NOW!

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Making it Better, NOW!

A Resource of the Saskatchewan Conference for Congregations

At the Annual Meeting of Saskatchewan Conference 2011, a proposal titled “It Gets Better, Now!” was passed. With the passage of this proposal, the Conference made a commitment to address the problems of homophobic (and transphobic) bullying/harassment and work toward creating safe spaces in their communities for all youth. The creation of this kit is a key step to providing resources for congregations to support this work.

This proposal builds on the “It Gets Better” campaign which started in the fall of 2010 when there was a series of suicides of youth who were bullied because they were gay or perceived to be gay. Dan Savage, writer and sex advice columnist from Seattle and his partner Terry Miller made a video for gay and lesbian youth, telling them that it gets better after high school. There is a summary of this movement and a copy of the video in the kit.

Some of us who work with youth, especially queer* youth, while recognizing the value and power of this message, also know that it is not enough to say, “wait or hang in there, because it gets better”. This is such a problem, that we need to work to make it better now. Hence the title of this kit became: **Making it Better, NOW!** We all have the ability to work to make it better. I would also add that as a church, it is an imperative, as we have a lot to answer for with regard to the homophobia that exists in our society today that too often results in violence against those who do not fit the sexual norm. As The United Church of Canada, we have clearly said that we support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) people in our communities and the church, and no longer believe that homosexuality is a sin. Thus we have an obligation to work to right the wrongs and make this world a safer and better place for our youth who are struggling, uncertain, and insecure because they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirited or transgender or targeted because they are perceived that they are.

As people of Saskatchewan, where our aboriginal population is an integral part of our community, we also need to learn about and address the concerns and needs of our aboriginal youth, especially those who are LGBT, now often identified as two-spirit. These young people face multiple identities as aboriginal and two-spirit, too often which can be in conflict with one another. Being open to these youth and their stories is part of being an intercultural church which we are working toward. You will find articles and information in this kit on these issues and realities as well.

* Elsewhere in this kit, you will find a glossary of terms. Queer is not in that glossary, but is a term used more frequently these days, especially among youth as an inclusive term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, intersex, questioning and allies (LGBTTIQA).

As you look through the kit, you will find that it provides both educational resources as well as resources on how to be a support and advocate in your community. There is much available online that can help provide further direction to starting groups or working with your schools around these issues. Much of the materials for schools, or about starting groups in schools, can be applicable to church communities as well. As we were creating this kit, there were requests for how do to this work in rural areas. While there is not much specific resources in this area, we know that sometimes all it takes is for a group to stand up for these issues and others who were too afraid to do so, will also come forward. We all know someone who is LGBT in our close circles. In smaller communities we can be more closeted about it until we find circles of support. The church can be such a circle. Last summer, I was at Camp fYrefly, a program for LGBT and allied youth aged 14-24. I asked many youth from rural areas what they needed for support. Most of them said, what helped was being able to be open about who they are and knowing where the support is – that there are people and places that are supportive is key to this. That is where being visible is very important – so we have included posters and stickers that help provide that opportunity to declare that this is a safe space for those places ready to commit to this.

It is our hope that each pastoral charge and congregation will take this work seriously and explore the resources and what may be possible to do in your community. Pass it on to a committee or individual who has some interest and passion for this ministry. This is important, life-saving work, because suicide for youth who are LGBT is four times the national average of their peers. If you would like another kit, call the Conference office or you can download the material as well from the Saskatchewan Conference website under Resources.

[\(http://sk.united-church.ca/\)](http://sk.united-church.ca/)

The Affirming Ministry Committee and Saskatchewan Conference commend you to this work with blessings and thanks.

Russell Mitchell-Walker
Covenor, Affirming Ministry Committee of Saskatchewan Conference

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

(From The United Church Of Canada LGBT Consultation 2011)

SEXUALITY

Sexual Identity includes “*who we are*” biologically (genitals, hormones, brain, chromosomes, senses, secondary sex characteristics).

Sexual Practice is defined as *what we do*.

Sexual Orientation is *the nature of our attractions* – heart, soul and body.

- The person with whom all those connections are made
- Straight: a person who is emotionally, spiritually and sexually attracted to someone of the opposite sex
- Gay: a man who is emotionally, spiritually and sexually attracted to men
- Lesbian: a woman who is emotionally, spiritually and sexually attracted to women
- Bisexual: people who are emotionally, spiritually and sexually attracted to individuals of either gender. Gender is not the first thing on the list of what they look for, other qualities are more important.
- Asexual: a person who is not attracted to either sex

Coming Out is the process of recognizing one’s sexual orientation and integrating that knowledge into one’s life.

GENDER

Gender Identity is defined by our *self-perception*.

Gender/Sex Role is defined by *our behaviour*.

Gender - masculine and feminine - is somewhat of a social construct which may differ from culture to culture. The World Health Organization defines gender as referring to *the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women* (such as behaviour and appearance).

- Feminism challenged the expression of gender *roles* - Trans folk are challenging the expression of gender *identity/perception*
- Homophobia mostly about the violation of sex roles – the core of both is sexism – policing the boundaries of gender identity and gender expression

Gender Identity refers to our innate, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both or neither. It can be different from the biological sex we were assigned at birth. Many people (but not all) who are living this experience refer to themselves as “transgender.” Medical research scientists are now able to conclude that gender identity is likely set in the brain before a child is born. This identity guides the child in how to behave and interact with others. Gender identity is separate from sexual orientation.

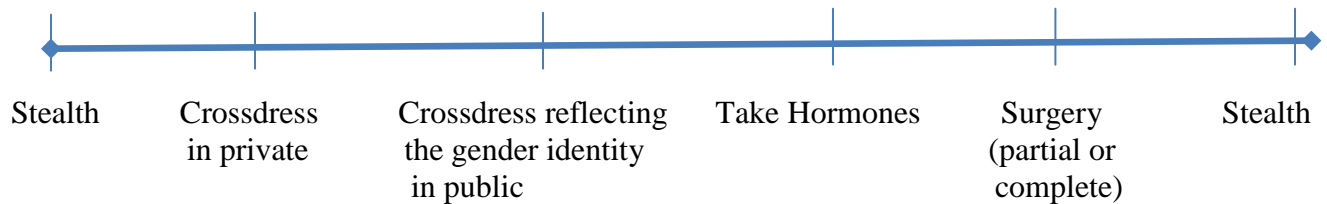
Gender Continuum or Spectrum is the construct that gender is not a binary system where there are only men and women, but a continuum or spectrum spanning from *man* to *woman* with an infinite number of gendered states in between. It is an attempt to account for the obvious variety and endless differences there are in how people gender themselves.

TRANSGENDER

Transgender is a term that remains in flux - is understood differently by many people - and so may not be the easiest term to understand.

- *Transgender* is used to refer to anyone who has a gender identity that is different than their biological or assigned sex, and/or expresses their gender in ways that differ from societal expectations for men and women. Transgender people may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual. Transgender people are found in every walk of life, every racial/ethnic group, every socioeconomic class, and every faith community.
- *Trans* is an abbreviation that is often used to refer to a broad community of individuals who may identify outside of the traditional and enforced gender binary. Individuals may self-identify as Trans in a broad or particular way, as the term makes room for many forms of identity and experience.
- Trans: Think of all the words that begin with the prefix trans. The trans words fall into roughly three categories:
 - Transition: for some trans people they see themselves as moving from one category to another (Male to Female; Female to Male)
 - Transform: for other trans people they understand their identities as MTF or FTM – but there are more than two genders; their gender identity is in both (gender queer, trans)
 - Transgress: for others, their identity is around transgressing the categories, as a political statement, performance, or other reasons (challenging the boxes).

Trans Continuum:



Gender Diversity: We include use of the term *gender diversity* because individuals express themselves in a variety of ways, and refer to themselves with a variety of terms, not just transgender. The terms *transgender* and *gender diversity* refer to people who self-identify as transgendered, intersex, two spirit, cross-dressers, transsexuals, bi-gendered, pan-gendered, genderqueer, androgynous, third gender, female and male impersonators, drag kings and drag queens, as well as people whose perceived gender or anatomic sex may conflict with their gender expression.

Gender Queer or Gender Neutral: Refers to individuals who may identify as both male and female, neither male nor female, or as falling completely outside the gender binary. Individuals who identify as Gender Queer or Neutral, may describe their identity as fluid and/or changing and may work to challenge gender stereotypes and the gender binary system.

Two Spirit: The term *two spirit* is a North American Aboriginal term used to describe an individual with a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit living in the same body. This English translation of the much older Anishinabe/Ojibwa term *niizh maleitoag* was coined in 1990 by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Native Americans, but two spirit people have existed in every indigenous community worldwide. The term is used to maintain cultural continuity with past cultures where some individuals manifested a balance of both feminine and masculine energies, making them inherently sacred people.

Transsexual: A *transsexual* (or transexual) is a person who identifies with the opposite gender to the sex assigned at birth. It is generally accepted that if an individual expresses *desire* to be of the opposite sex, or to assert that one is of the opposite sex to which they were born, then that person is a transsexual. While transsexual is often included under the blanket terms trans or transgender, many transsexuals do not identify as transgendered. Some see transgender as subsuming and erasing their identity. Some reject the term for themselves because to them it implies a breaking down of gender roles, when in fact they see themselves as fitting a gender role - just not the one they were assigned at birth.

Cross-dressers: A person who, on occasion, wears the clothing considered typical for another gender, but who does not necessarily desire to change their gender. Reasons for cross-dressing can range from a need to express a feminine or masculine side to attainment of erotic gratification. Cross-dressers generally do not want to change their bodies medically. Cross-dressers can be of any sexual orientation. Many cross-dressers identify as heterosexual.

Inter-sex: Refers to a medical diagnosis describing an individual who is born with sex, chromosomes, genitalia, and/or secondary sex characteristics that are neither exclusively male nor female. Individuals with intersex conditions may or may not identify as part of Trans or Queer communities. Historically intersex individuals have been assigned one sex or another at birth through rigid medical protocols, sometimes including surgical intervention, and intersex individuals were rarely told of their condition until later in life. Those involved in the movement for intersex rights criticize medical protocols and advocate for individual rights to self-determination. Specialists have published evidence that indicate the harm that can arise as a result of inappropriate interventions, and advise minimizing the use of childhood surgical procedures. The term hermaphrodite is no longer commonly used, though some people who are intersex have re-claimed it.

ISMS AND PHOBIAS

Heterosexism: institutionalization of heterosexual privilege

Homophobia: Irrational fear of homosexuals and same-sex behaviour.

Transphobia is the same thing manifested in homophobia – the policing of gender identity and expression.

Xenophobia: fear of strangers

Sexism: fear of violation of gender and sex roles (how it manifests in homophobia)

Erotophobia: fear of sexuality out of control

IT GETS BETTER

Growing up isn't easy. Many young people face daily tormenting and bullying, leading them to feel like they have nowhere to turn. This is especially true for LGBT kids and teens, who often hide their sexuality for fear of bullying. Without other openly gay adults and mentors in their lives, they can't imagine what their future may hold. In many instances, gay and lesbian adolescents are taunted — even tortured — simply for being themselves.

Justin Aaberg. Billy Lucas. Cody Barker. Asher Brown. Seth Walsh. Raymond Chase. Tyler Clementi. They were tragic examples of youth who could not believe that it does actually get better.

While many of these teens couldn't see a positive future for themselves, we can. The *It Gets Better Project* was created to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach -- if they can just get through their teen years. The *It Gets Better Project* wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone — and it WILL get better

What is the It Gets Better Project?

In September 2010, syndicated columnist and author Dan Savage created a YouTube video with his partner Terry to inspire hope for young people facing harassment. In response to a number of students taking their own lives after being bullied in school, they wanted to create a personal way for supporters everywhere to tell LGBT youth that, yes, it does indeed get better.

Two months later, the *It Gets Better Project* (TM) has turned into a worldwide movement, inspiring nearly 10,000 user-created videos and over 30 million views. To date, the project has received submissions from celebrities, organizations, activists, politicians and media personalities, including President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, Adam Lambert, Anne Hathaway, Colin Farrell, Matthew Morrison of "Glee", Joe Jonas, Joel Madden, Ke\$ha, Sarah Silverman, Tim Gunn, Ellen DeGeneres, Suze Orman, the staffs of The Gap, Google, Facebook, Pixar, the Broadway community, and many more. For us, every video changes a life. It doesn't matter who makes it.

The website www.itgetsbetter.org is a place where young people who are lesbian, gay, bi, or trans can see how love and happiness can be a reality in their future. It's a place where our straight allies can visit and support their friends and family members. It's a place where people can share their stories, take the *It Gets Better Project* pledge, watch videos of love and support, and seek help through the Trevor Project and GLSEN.

Who is Dan Savage?

Dan Savage is author of the internationally syndicated relationship and sex column *Savage Love* and the weekly podcast *Savage Lovecast*. He is editorial director of the Seattle weekly *The Stranger*, where he was formerly Editor-in-Chief. He is a regular contributor to PRI's "*This American Life*" and has been featured as a Real Time Reporter on HBO's "*Real Time with Bill Maher*."

Dan heard about the suicides of Justin Aaberg and Billy Lucas and had a reaction so many LGBT adults had. "I wish I could've talked to that kid for five minutes before he killed himself," Dan recently said. "I'd tell him that however bad it was in high school or middle school...it gets better." The *It Gets Better Project* was born.

Russell Mitchell-Walker

Sexuality and Spirituality

In 1984, The United Church of Canada produced the report, Gift, Dilemma, and Promise, which outlines much of our present position on sexuality and the work that had been done through the study, “In God’s Image – Male and Female”. It was out of this work that we began to discern regarding the issue of homosexuality in society and the church. This resource has a wealth of good information in it regarding sexuality, intimacy, sexual expression, sexism, marriage and how all this relates to our faith. For the purposes of this kit, we wanted to provide some information regarding the importance of sexuality being integrated with our spirituality. They are not separate but are an essential part of who we are. If we are not whole in one, then we are not whole. The following excerpts are direct quotes, intended to provide some reflection on this important reality in our lives.

From Gift, Dilemma and Promise:

Sexuality and Selfhood:

To be human is to be sexual. This is because our sexuality, unlike many other aspects of life is not an optional extra, something to be taken or left according to a whim of the moment. Rather, like the colour of our eyes, it is a given, an integral part of our being and what it means to be human.

Human beings, are not disembodied spirit-selves who happen to have bodies. We are essentially, body-selves, we encounter the world around us through some or all of the senses – through sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch. Our **sexuality**, then, is grounded in the broader experience of **sensuality**. (pg. 10)

Precisely because of the rich variety of ways in which we experience and express our sexuality, John Gagnon¹ suggests that we school ourselves to think and speak of human **sexualities!** The plural is important –it not only encourages us to acknowledge that our experiences are many and varied, but also discourages us from making glib or restrictive judgments about what is acceptable or normative behaviour, especially when they apply to someone else. (pg. 11)

Sexuality as Gift

The story of Creation (Genesis 1:26-31) makes it clear that human sexuality is a gift from God, intended as one response suggests, “to reflect God’s glory and for the building up of God’s people”. It is meant to be received with thankfulness and enjoyed with wholehearted delight.

Along with other aspects of the divine initiative in Creation, it was pronounced “good”, and in fact “very good” (Genesis 1:31). How else can we make sense of a “wise and good creator bestowing it upon us?”

It is important to recognize how fundamental gender is to the story of Creation. Male and female, God created them (Genesis 1:27). Hence for the word for humankind (atham) is transformed into man (ish) and woman (ishah).²

¹ Gagnon, John H. and Smith, Barbara, **Human Sexualities**, Scott, Foresman, Glenview Illinois, 1977.

² Carla Blakley, in her thesis: Que(e)r(y)ing the Image of God – Challenging the Heterosexual Myth, identifies merisms of Hebrew Bible, which is “the art of expressing a totality by mentioning the parts, usually the two extremes, concerning a given idea, quality or quantity” (Krasovec 1983, 232) Male and female in Genesis is one of these merisms. Thus male and female does not mean just a male and a female, but male and female and everything in between, which includes intersex, transgender, gay, lesbian, and bisexual! Carla is the pastor at Bread of Life Lutheran in Regina, and co-chair of Camp fYrefly.

In both Creation stories in Genesis the reference to gender is clear and emphatic. Indeed that there is a tantalizing suggestion here that our sexuality is a reflection of the divine nature, the very “image of God (from *Insight from Scriptures*, pg. 17)

Reflections on Sexuality and Spirituality from Courage to Love³

Sexuality is a basic human characteristic; it is part of our being human. Hence, it is part of the handiwork of God.

...God did not find aloneness good and that is why God created friendship and companionship. I believe that for as long as every relationship is just and loving, mutually affirming, and mutually enriching, God will surely bless it and say, ‘This too, is very good’. (Pg. 182-183, Hope S. Antone, Malaysia)

The spiritual life involves our exploration of life in all its fullness, including our imperfections that in some way nurture our journey into the mystery of life and death. This insight enables us to recognize and accept the fact that our spirituality enables transformational change through our acceptance of the gifts of sex, sexuality, sensuality and spirituality along with other gifts that enable us to enjoy our lives to the full. (pg. 184, Bill Kirkpatrick, Canada/England)

...sexuality is crucial to God’s design that creature do not dwell in isolation and loneliness but in communion and community.

Through the incarnation, God not only participates in human sexual experiences but God is intrinsically sexual. (pg. 184, Hg Chin-pang, Hong Kong)

Acknowledgements and Affirmations – From Gift, Dilemma & Promise

We affirm that our sexuality is a gift of God. In its life-enhancing, non-exploitive forms it is a primary way of relating to ourselves and to one another. (pg. 19-20)

We affirm the church’s call to proclaim the worth of human sexuality and to speak out concerning the abuses of human sexuality in individual lives, in the community and in the structures of society. In this respect, we understand that our responsibility is more to challenge and support than to condemn, more prophetic and pastoral than imperial. (pg. 20 – Sexuality and Selfhood)

We affirm that all people experience a hunger for intimacy that is a profoundly spiritual matter, a hunger for God. It is in our experience of the intimate God that we find the grace and possible intimacy with one another. (pg. 53 – Intimacy)

³ Courage to Love, Liturgies for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community, compiled by Geoffrey Duncan, The Pilgrim Press, 2002.

What's in a Word?

(From GLSEN's Thinkb4youspeak, Educators Guide*)

Below is a brief summary of some of the many theories about the origin of the words “faggot,” “dyke,” and “gay,” and how their meanings have evolved over time. Use Lesson Plan: What Do “Faggot” and “Dyke” Mean? (at www.glsen.org) in conjunction with these histories to deepen students' understanding of the impact of homophobic language and anti-LGBT bias.

The History of the Word “Faggot”

You may know that “faggot” means “a bundle of sticks.” The word “faggot” has been part of the English language since the 1300s. When and how did it become an anti-gay slur? During the European Inquisitions, “faggot” referred to the sticks used to set fires for burning heretics, or people who opposed the teachings of the Catholic Church. Heretics were required to gather bundles of sticks (“faggots”) and carry them to the fire that was being built for them. Heretics who changed their beliefs to avoid being killed were forced to wear a “faggot” design embroidered on their sleeve, to show everyone that they had opposed the Church. Since it was hard to live with such a bad reputation, people began to use the word “faggot” to refer to anything that was considered to be a burden or difficult to bear. Unfortunately, the term quickly became a sexist insult, as people used it to disrespect women in the same way the term “ball and chain” is used today.

The word “faggot” appeared in the United States during the early 20th century. It was used to refer to men who were seen as less masculine than people believed they should be. During the course of the 20th century, the word “faggot” became the slur most commonly used to abuse gay men and men perceived to be gay. In fact, “faggot” has become a general insult that is often used to humiliate any man. Since many people are biased against LGBT people, being called “faggot” is a big fear of many heterosexual men, and thus the easiest way to hurt them. Considering the long and violent history of the word, it's important for people to understand its meaning before they use it so carelessly.

The History of the Word “Dyke”

“Dyke” is a very old word. You may have encountered it already in a Science class; it's a mass of mineral matter that fills a hole in a rock formation. Or, you may have seen it in a Geography lesson; it refers to a variety of ditches, trenches, caves and dams that have been built by many different civilizations. None of these definitions, however, relates to the modern usage of “dyke” as a slur directed at lesbian women or women perceived to be lesbian.

One theory about the origin of “dyke” as an anti-lesbian slur suggests that “dyke” came from the word “hermaphrodite,” which used to be a very common term describing people born with ambiguous sex characteristics. When the word “hermaphrodite” was more commonly used, popular variations such as “morphodite” and “morphodike” sprang up. Some people believe that “dyke” came from “morphodike” and was used to reinforce the stereotype that all lesbians look and act like men.

Early British history provides another theory about the origin of the word “dyke.” Boudicca (pronounced “bou-dikka”) was a chieftain/queen in the Iceni tribe in Britain during the 1st century C.E. At the death of her husband, according to his will, Boudicca was given control of the tribe. But the Romans, who were occupying Britain, did not recognize the will of Boudicca’s husband, and seized his land and property, flogging Boudicca and raping her two daughters in the process. Boudicca then led a victorious armed revolt against the Romans, but they ultimately countered the attack and slaughtered many Iceni.

No matter which theory is the most accurate, all point to the word “dyke” having its roots in beliefs about how women are supposed to look and act. Women who’ve refused to conform to society’s expectations of them often have been labeled as “dykes,” whether or not they’ve identified as lesbians.

The History of the Word “Gay”

The word gay dates back to the 12th century and comes from the Old French “gai,” meaning “full of joy or mirth.” It may also be connected with the Old High German “gahi,” meaning impulsive. For centuries, gay was used commonly in speech and literature to mean happy, carefree, bright and showy, and did not take on any sexual meaning until the 1600s.

At that time the meaning of gay as carefree evolved to imply that a person was unrestrained by morals and prone to decadence and promiscuity. A prostitute might have been described as a “gay woman” and a womanizer as a “gay man.” “Gay house” was commonly used to refer to a brothel and, later, “gaiety” was used as a common name for certain places of entertainment. In the 1890s, the term “gey cat” (a Scottish variant of gay) was used to describe a vagrant who offered sexual services to women, or a young traveler who was new to the road and in the company of an older man. This latter use suggests that the younger man was in a sexually submissive role and may be among the first times that gay was used to imply a homosexual relationship.

In 1951, gay appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary for the first time as slang for homosexual, but was most likely used in this way “underground” at least 30 years earlier. For example, in the 1938 film, *Bringing Up Baby*, Cary Grant dons a feathery robe when his clothes are sent to the cleaners and says, “...I just went gay.” This line (ad-libbed by Grant) can be interpreted to mean that he was behaving in a happy-go-lucky or lighthearted way, but is accepted by many as the first use of gay to mean homosexual in a mainstream movie.

Today gay is a socially accepted term for homosexual people. However, this word is rooted in the classification of certain types of people as illicit, counterculture or behaving in ways that go against the respectable conventions of society. When gay is used today to mean stupid or undesirable (it has only been used in this way since the 1990s), it carries with it a history of negative judgment and rigid ideas about who or what is acceptable.

The Pink Triangle

The real story behind the pink triangle begins prior to World War II. Paragraph 175, a clause in German law, prohibited homosexual relations (much like many states in the U.S. today have laws against "crimes of nature"). In 1935, during Hitler's rise to power, he extended this law to include homosexual kissing, embracing, and even having homosexual fantasies. An estimated 25,000 people were convicted under this law between 1937 and 1939 alone. They were sent to prisons and later concentration camps. Their sentence also included sterilization, most commonly in the form of castration. In 1942, Hitler extended the punishment for homosexuality to death.

Prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were labeled according to their crimes by inverted colored triangles. "Regular" criminals were denoted by a green triangle, political prisoners by red triangles and Jews by two overlapping yellow triangles (to form the Star of David, the most common Jewish symbol). **Homosexual prisoners wore labels with pink triangles. People who were deemed "asocial elements" wore black triangles- amongst these were the mentally ill, vagrants, prostitutes and lesbians.** Gay Jews- the lowest form of prisoner- had overlapping yellow and pink triangles. This system also created a social hierarchy among the prisoners, and it has been reported that the pink triangle prisoners often received the worst workloads and were continually harassed and beaten by both guards and other prisoners.

Although homosexual prisoners were not shipped en masse to the Auschwitz death camps like so many of the Jewish prisoners, there were still large numbers of gay men executed there along with other non-Jewish prisoners. The real tragedy though occurred after the war. When the Allies defeated Germany and the Nazi Regime, the political and remaining Jewish prisoners were released from the camps (the regular criminals- murderers, rapists, etc.- were not released for obvious reasons). The Nazi amendments to [Paragraph 175](#), which turned homosexuality from a minor offense into a [felony](#), remained intact in both East and West Germany after the war for a further 24 years. While suits seeking monetary compensation have failed, in 2002 the [German government](#) issued an official apology to the [gay community](#).

In the 1970s, the pink triangle started to be used in conjunction with the gay liberation movement. Like the word "queer," it is a symbol of hate which has been reclaimed and now stands for pride.

Searched with Wikipedia.org- pink triangle, and nazi concentration camp badges

Compiled by Marnie Deighton

Coming In: Native American Two Spirit people

By Dr Alexandria Wilson

The following section is presented with the permission of Dr. Alexandria Wilson from Opaskwayak Cree Nation and professor at the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan.

“Coming in,” my Lakota friend Wayne told me, “Coming in—that’s what Two Spirit people do.” I knew exactly what he meant. He was pointing out that, as Native people who are not straight, we had become comfortable with who we are not because we had “come out” (a process that seems like a prerequisite for happiness in modern books and movies about gay or lesbian people). We became comfortable with ourselves and empowered when we came into our identities as Two Spirit people.

The term Two Spirit is a self-descriptor used by many Native American and Canadian lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. We call ourselves Two Spirit as a way to take control of our identities and experiences. We are Native American people who are LGBT and our stories about how we grew into our identities are typically very different from conventional coming out stories. Rather than trying to fit ourselves into the established mainstream identities for LGBT people, we are developing identities that fit who we are.

A Spiritual Purpose

My family is from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, a community six hours north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. In the Swampy Cree dialect of our community, there are no gender-specific pronouns and, I have been told, no word for homosexual. Rather than singling out people or things as female or male, our language distinguishes between what is animate and inanimate. Anything that is animate is understood to have a spiritual purpose. Our language and our culture are rooted in this understanding—that every living creature and everything that acts in and on this world is spiritually meaningful.

The term Two Spirit acknowledges and reminds us of this truth. My identity as a Two Spirit woman pulls together the most fundamental aspects of who I am: Cree, gay, spiritual, a part of my family and community, connected to my traditional culture and lands, situated in the long history of my peoples and a professor at a university in the city nearest to my home.

For the last 15 years, my academic work has focused on what it means to be Two Spirit. I began this work for very personal reasons. I knew that by learning more about Two Spirit people, I would strengthen my own sense of self. I also believed that this knowledge could help strengthen our own communities. Within both the Native population and the LGBT population, young people are much more likely to attempt suicide than they are in the general population. Learning about and talking to our youth and other community members about Two Spirit identity could help them move along their own healing paths.

I am not the first person to write about or research Two Spiritedness. Anthropologists, queer theorists, historians and other folks have had lots to say about who we are and how we got here. I went through this literature and, to be honest, found very little about what I wanted to know. What I was most interested in were the daily experiences of Two Spirit people.

Searching for Acceptance

I knew what my own life had been like. I was lucky to have been born and raised on my First Nation. My earliest memories are of being well cared for, loved and accepted for who I am. I also remember that, as I grew older, racism, homophobia and sexism were directed at me, often all at the same time and sometimes by my own people. As I approached adulthood, I began to believe I belonged in the city. There, I imagined I would have the opportunity, anonymity and freedom to explore my sexuality. Like so many other Native people, I moved from my home community to the city only to discover that the truth fell far short of my imagination. As I had expected, I was able to meet other LGBT people (many of whom were Cree) and explore my own sexuality but I did not feel any more comfortable or happy with who I was. If anything, I felt worse. I still had to deal with racism, homophobia and sexism but now I was alone, far away from my family, community, land and all the things that had kept me connected and helped restore my spirits at home.

The conventional “coming out” stories that circulate in mainstream American culture typically feature a declaration of an independent identity. The story goes something like this: a LGBT person musters their courage, prepares for conflict and then announces their sexuality to a friend or family member. More often than not, their announcement is met with anger, resistance, rejection, abandonment or violence. As my friend Wayne puts it, in these stories, the gay person is trying to come out of a dark closet and someone else is doing their best to push them back in and shut the door behind them.

A Circular Path

My “coming in” story and those that other Two Spirit people have shared with me, however, are not about declaring our independence. When we come in to our Two Spirit identity, we are affirming our interdependence—our collective identity. Being Two Spirit is about presenting oneself and being fully present as a Native person who is LGBT. We understand that we have a place in—and are valuable to—our families, communities, cultures, histories and the present-day world.

These are things I have learned from my own experience and from other Two Spirit people. In the research I conducted for my doctoral dissertation, I brought Two Spirit people together to talk about what it means to be Two Spirit: *I feel like I am really a part of the circle, like I belong to something bigger... Things seemed to make sense once I found the Two Spirit community. It was and is healing. Two Spirit is healing.*

Things started to clear. I realized it wasn't about colonization and oppression... It wasn't about measuring up and comparing and not being good enough or smart enough. It wasn't about wasn'ts. It is about our strength, our land... our hearts. It has taken me a long time to see that I am valuable. Now that I see it and feel it, everything seems possible. I looked to so many places by travelling and even dating “exotic” people. But here the answer was right within me and the answer is in our communities. We are our communities and they are us. Being Two Spirit means I am always at home.

Coming into a Two Spirit identity is a journey along a circular path. It is our nature to be whole and to be together. We are born into a circle of family, community, living creatures and the land. If we encounter racism, homophobia, sexism or other behaviours that oppress us, the balance may be disturbed and we may lose our place in the circle—but even if we lose our place we can still find guidance in our traditions, histories, memories and collective experience of this world. Two Spirit identity does exactly that. It enables us to circle back to where we belong and reclaim, reinvent and redefine our beginnings, our roots, our communities, our support systems and our collective and individual selves. With that promise, we come in to the best of who we are. I close with a story from the first time I participated in a Two Spirit gathering.

On the wall of the main cabin, a sign was posted that said “Pow-wow—Saturday night.” I read and immediately felt dizzy.

It blew me away just to think about it—Two Spirit people dancing!

I have lived with dreams of dancing, dreams where I pick my feet up and spin around. There are many feathers on my arms and my body and I know all the steps. I am an eagle. Arms extended, I lift off the ground and begin to fly in big circles.

Was this my chance?

I waited patiently for Saturday night to come, for the pow-wow to start.

I sat still that evening, listening and watching.

The drumming started and we gathered in a circle.

And then a blur flew by me and landed inside the circle.

It was a Two Spirit person dancing.

More and more of our dancers drifted into the circle.

I still waited, sitting still and on the edge of tears.

I had invited my ancestors to join me and I knew they were with me.

We watched together through the night, proud of our sisters and brothers and a little jealous of their bravery.

It was time for the last song.

Everyone was expected to dance.

As I entered the circle, I could feel the drumbeat in my heart.

The songs came back to me.

I circled the dance area and in my most humble moment, with the permission of my ancestors, my 11 year old Two Spirit steps returned to me.

I danced.

Used with permission of author, Dr Alexandria Wilson, PhD, Opaskwayak Cree, who teaches in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Email: alex.wilson@usask.ca

Part of Normal

By Charles Hamilton
Bridges (a Saskatoon Star Phoenix publication)



Dylan Rose sits for a portrait at The Hollows restaurant where he works.

[More Images »](#)

Photograph by: Andrew Spearin

Dylan Rose was riding his bike home from a bar one night when someone driving a pickup truck, honking the horn and yelling out the window, ran him off the road. The attack, he says, probably had to do with the way he was dressed — it was summer and he was wearing short shorts and a see-through tank top. Rose ended up with a few bumps and bruises and was on painkillers for a month. But the emotional scars endured. It was the first time the 24-year-old was the target of homophobic violence. But it wasn't the first time he was the victim of unwarranted prejudice.

Rose is aboriginal and gay. He's spent his life wading through multiple layers of discrimination and stigma. Growing up all over Saskatchewan, in places like in Cumberland House, Sandy Lake and North Battleford, he experienced what he calls the double whammy of racism and homophobia.

"There was lot of racism, for sure," he says. "On top of that, I was always like, 'Oh man, I'm gay too. I'm never coming out.' It was tough."

But Rose, who plans on starting law school at the University of Saskatchewan in the fall, did eventually come out of the closet. It was Jan. 26, 2006, after he moved to Saskatoon for university. Since then, he has embraced the term queer. Once used as an anti-gay epithet, it now refers largely to sexual minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people. But there is another term he's embraced as well — these days he calls himself two-spirited.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the term two-spirit has become a rallying cry for gay, LGBT aboriginal people all over the world. Two-spirited is used to identify people who are both queer and aboriginal. But, as Rose and countless other queer aboriginal people have found out, the term is more complicated than that.

Like so many young queer youth, Rose made the exodus from rural life to the big city with hopes of finding kinship — queer friends, queer-friendly bars and queer support groups.

In the weeks, months and years after he came out, Rose struggled to find that community. Although things got better once he moved to Saskatoon from North Battleford, he spent years in counselling, dealing with mental health issues related to his racial and sexual identity.

It wasn't so much that he couldn't find like-minded people, but he grappled with his identity, trying to find an intersection between his life as a queer person and life as an aboriginal person.

"I hung out at the Pride Centre and I also hung out at the Aboriginal Students Centre, but there was no other people who hung out at those places and found community in both those places. I felt like I was one of the only queer aboriginals on campus. It made me feel more alone in some ways," he says.

Rose's father is from the Red Pheasant First Nation, and his mother had friends on reserves all over the province. When he wasn't in school, he would travel around to powwows and spend summers on different reserves. Sexuality and gender were not common topics on the reserve.

"There were like two gay people on the reserve," Rose says. "There was this guy on the reserve and his name was Burt and everyone jokingly called him, auntie Burt so I knew he was gay."

When Rose came out, he got a diverse reaction from family and friends living on the reserve. Some embraced his difference, while others scorned it.

"It's a mix. You have those people who are practicing a more traditional way of life and they are more open-minded to the way people are living their lives — as long as they aren't harming anyone, they will treat them as moral human beings," he says.

"But there is that Christian side that sees me as a sinner, and think I'm going to hell."

It was during this time that Rose heard the term "two-spirited." It was first used in 1990, at a Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg. The idea was to encompass the spiritual, not simply the physical and the sexual when talking about queer aboriginal people. In literal terms, people might think of it as having both male and female spirits. But these days, that interpretation has largely been dismissed as homophobic.

"It doesn't literally mean you have two spirits. In order for me to be a lesbian, it doesn't mean I have to be part man," says University of Saskatchewan professor Alex Wilson, an educator and one of the world's foremost experts on aboriginal queer culture and two-spiritedness.

Wilson has been studying what it means to be queer and aboriginal for more than two decades — she began before the word two-spirited became commonplace. During her first few years of university, she was working as a queer youth group facilitator. It was there she finally understood the gravity of situation facing young queer aboriginal people.

“I went home for the summer and when I came back in the fall, the two Native kids in the group had committed suicide. I was like, ‘What is going on?’”

In Canada, LGBT aboriginal youth have some of the highest suicide rates in the country. They represent two of the most at-risk groups. According to Health Canada, suicide rates are five to seven times higher in First Nations communities than in the rest of Canada and LGBT youth are also at a much higher risk of attempting suicide than heterosexual youth.

“With aboriginal gay youth, it’s way higher. It’s off the charts,” says Wilson.

Wilson is quick to point out that “oppression is not a competition,” but there are certain realities that come with being two-spirited or queer and aboriginal that set them apart from the rest of the queer community. The suicide rate is just one of them.

Wilson grew up on the Opaskwayak Cree Nation and that was where she first came out to her family and friends as a lesbian. She says no one was surprised when she told them she liked women, not men. Her story is similar to many others that have been shared by young queer aboriginal people: being gay on reserve was not that big a deal.

“When I ask the elders, they say we don’t have a subculture; we don’t have a word for (being queer) because it is part of normal,” says Wilson.

That is likely why the term two-spirited is so new — before contact, it is widely believed, queer people were just a regular part of life for many aboriginal nations.

Wilson is hesitant to embrace all the stories that have come out about the reverence her people had for two-spirited people before contact. Her research has found that before contact there were people who did not fit into Western gender binaries — men who didn’t fit into traditional male roles, and women who didn’t fit into traditional female roles. If these people were not revered, they were, she says, simply commonplace.

“Every nation that I know of — that I’ve talked to people from — have had people who don’t fit this western gender binary. Whether they are gay or not, we don’t know,” she says.

Wilson, like many other two-spirit scholars, believes homophobia was a western import, hammered home by the trauma of colonization and the residential school system. This western way of thinking, she says, still permeates aboriginal traditions and spirituality, on and off reserve.

“They still have that Christian mindset, meaning they are very dogmatic in their religion,” Wilson explains.

“Research has shown that the risk factor for all queer youth is fundamentalist religion. We know a lot about that in terms of Christianity and Islam and other organized religions, but it also holds for traditional aboriginal religion. The very place where we should be gaining strength and grounding for many gay youth has become marginalizing.”

But Wilson’s attention is directed not only at aboriginal peoples, their traditional religions and their leadership. She would like to see more acceptance of two-spirited and aboriginal queer people with the larger mainstream queer community.

When she first moved to Winnipeg and entered the queer community there she was surprised by the amount of racism that persisted, even in some of the most progressive sections of society. Rose says he's had similar experiences after moving to Saskatoon.

"You'd think that within this urban queer community there would be more acceptance, but there is serious racism going on," he says.

"Sometimes you create this kind of animosity yourself but sometimes it's totally out there, it exists."

Rose calls Wilson one of his mentors, and he says had he not learned about aboriginal history and traditions relating to queerness and two-spiritedness, he would not have come this far.

"I don't think I would have found myself, found my identity," he says.

These days, Rose blogs about his two-spirited experiences. The blog, Urban Pionqueer, is a mixture of humour, personal essays and reflections about his life as a "20-something, gay, aboriginal." He says he is doing it for the youth, the young aboriginal queer people who are going through the same struggles he did when he was younger.

"I remember thinking, why am I here? Why do I have to deal with so much that the average person doesn't have to deal with? People just didn't get it," he says. "I wanted my story out there so people could benefit from it."

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