

*We know what the scriptures say.
What do they mean?*



Interpretations of the Heart

by Stephanie Mott

#DoLove

*Interpretations of selected scriptures
through the eyes of a transgender woman*

Somewhere in the course of my life, I began looking at the verses in the Bible as less of a strict list of rules for living, and more of an invitation to life; as a source of inspiration, rather than a cause for perspiration.

Table of Contents

i - Table of Contents
iii - About the Author
iv - Introduction
01 - Matthew 5:8
03 - John 3:16
04 - Luke 23:34
05 - John 15:13
06 - Psalm 119:30
07 - Psalm 27:1
09 - Philippians 4:8-9
11 - 2 Corinthians 5:17
13 - Proverbs 17:22
15 - John 3:6
17 - James 1:2
19 - Jeremiah 29:11
21 - 1 Corinthians 15:58
23 - 1 Corinthians 13:11-12
25 - Matthew 7:1
27 - I Corinthians 13:4-7
29 - Hebrews 11:1
31 - Matthew 22:39
33 - Deuteronomy 31:6
35 - Proverbs 2:12-14
37 - Matthew 5:44
39 - Luke 2:11

41 - Galatians 3:28

43 - Romans 8:31

45 - Psalm 103:12

46 - Genesis 5:2

49 - Matthew 13:3-8

51 - Romans 8:5-8

53 - Deuteronomy 6:5

54 - Romans 14:12

55 - Matthew 25:31-41

57 - Psalm 23-4

SECTION TWO - FAITH WRITINGS

60 - Transgender Footprints in the Sand

64 - Stephanie's Prayer

65 - God Stuff

68 - In One . . . Split . . . Second

69 - Letter to My Soul

72 - Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven, But . . .

74 - The Only Functional Response to Hate

78 - Transgender Acceptance Simplified: The Air and the Light

82 - Claiming My Religious Right

85 - Fear and Ignorance Are the Locks

89 - Trans and Gender Non-Conforming: No Longer Afraid of the Light

92 - Empowering Transgender Lights to Shine

95 - Transgender in Right Relationship With God

About the Author

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She is the state vice-chair of Equality Kansas, having served previously as the state vice-chair (2011) and the state chair (2012-2013). In addition, she is a board member of the Topeka Chief of Police Advisory Board, Topeka Pride, and Capital City Equality Center, as well as serving on the advisory board for the Beacon Youth Group.

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Introduction

The Bible should never be used as a weapon to dehumanize any human being. To do so, is clearly in conflict with the teachings and example of Jesus. If a person uses the Bible to justify discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation, they have surrendered their ability to accurately claim to be Christian.

This collection is not an attempt to discredit the Bible. It is an attempt to show that living authentically as a transgender woman is not contrary to the word of God.

I believe that telling another person they are not worthy of the love of God is one of the most un-Christian things a person can do.

I suppose this is where I might insert something about loving the sinner and hating the sin. But I believe that is also an un-Christian thing to do.

Instead, I believe the Christian thing to do is just to love each and every child of God to the best of my ability. And to work honestly and committedly toward becoming better able to do that, every day.

This is a few of the scriptures and a few of my writings that speak to me, as a transgender woman.

Matthew 5:8 (NIV)

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

I have been greatly rewarded for being willing to step out into the unknown and place my faith in the idea that the universe will guide me and care for me if my intentions are pure.

Not that my heart could qualify as pure, but if my heart is with purpose of sharing love unconditionally, I shall see God - as it were - so to speak.

Seeing God has not been some kind of burning bush thing. No skies opening up with resounding voices declaring salvation and/or destruction.

The sight, or sound, or knowledge of God, to me, is the innocent look of trust on a child's face.

That moment when the sense of correctness in the air is so profoundly undeniable that time seems to slow down to a perfect mix of real and surreal.

Those times when the sky has become the canvas of the spirits of every artist who has ever lived.

If God is love, seeing God is seeing love, and believing in God is believing in love.

I have no knowledge of who or what God is or isn't.

I have come to believe that my purpose is not to wrap my head around the identity or existence of God.

I have come to believe that my purpose is to wrap my heart around the pain and suffering of other human beings - as best I can.

John 3:16 - (NIV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Looking at the literal meaning of this verse, one would naturally focus on the part about eternal life through believing in the Son.

Looking beyond the literal meaning, one might focus first on the *God so loved the world* - not only as a description of God's love for the world - but perhaps also as a description of God's hope for the world.

More specifically, that humanity might love the world to the extent that we are willing to give our lives to making it a better place for all people. By seeking to learn love for all people.

That *eternal life* is made possible by loving the world enough to give ourselves to the world. To the betterment of all. To the betterment of the world, itself.

Maybe it's saying something different from, or in addition to, what the words seem to say.

Luke 23:34 (NIV)

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

I believe in the idea that people do the best they know how to do. Sometimes, that isn't very good.

But I believe if they were able to do better, they would do better.

Life, lived-experiences, childhood lessons and events, inherent strengths and weaknesses, learned strengths and weaknesses, pressures, fears, abilities - etcetera, etcetera - play parts in who people are and what they do.

I know that I have been, and continue to be, on a life-long journey of discovery that is enhanced and limited by all these things.

Within this belief are the seeds of compassion and forgiveness.

Within this belief are the seeds of self-compassion and self-forgiveness.

Within this belief is the hope for a world of understanding and community.

John 15:13 (NIV)

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Racism is the antithesis of the meaning of this verse, as is classism, ableism, ageism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, or any other regard for other human beings that sees them as less than.

Every child born into this world is a precious child.

Anything contrary to that is contrary to God.

These are the words that speak to me. They are not my words to speak to another. They are not expectations for me to assign to anyone's life.

This is the calling I hear - to live my life in a way that reflects the best representation of love I can assemble, in spite of my weakness, in the face of my failures, in the light of the love which is given to me.

Psalm 119:30 (NIV)

I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set my heart on your laws.

I wake in the middle of the night, and my head is filled with the responsibilities and commitments and worries of the coming day.

Yet my heart is filled with the possibilities and community and wondrous beauty of the world in which I am blessed to live.

It is interesting to me that my mind might be so troubled yet my soul so much at peace.

I guess that might be the part I think of as faith.

The guide mark of my faith is not the certainty that things will be okay.

The guide mark of my faith is the certainty that I will continue to try to make them better.

As will others.

Psalm 27:1 (NIV)

*The Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?*

I would be hard pressed to identify any single factor that created more (and more imposing) barriers to my life, than fear.

Much has changed in the last ten years. Yet, I still have fears.

Truthfully, I am always afraid, always uncertain, and always in doubt. As I step out into the unknown. When I try to stand up to those who deny equality to our LGBTQ+ youth. And as I strive to define my values by taking positions according to justice, as opposed to comfort.

The fear, though not absent, has lost its ability to clip my wings.

I suppose this is the faith of a sparrow who launches herself over the edge of the nest, perhaps not sure of the ability to fly, but quite certain that there must be more than the confines and limitations of safety.

The Lord is my light and my salvation. The Lord is the stronghold of my life.

The fear has ceased to be the fear of falling, and has become the fear of not spreading my wings. The fear of not daring to believe that the Creator, or the universe, or the power of love will provide all that is needed to fly.

Those who might stand in the way are more like spectators than participants. They have no power. Not in the challenges or the battles. Not in the hopes or the dreams. Not in the fear.

Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?

Indeed.

Philippians 4: 8-9 (NIV)

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

The 4th chapter of Philippians is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible.

This passage is probably my second favorite of this chapter - with verses 6-7 being my favorite as they speak to giving it up, completely, to God (or the universe or . . .)

The combination of these two sets of verses translates to me as these well-traveled words: Trust God and do the next right thing.

As I look at the 8th verse I see the words that align my faith with my authenticity.

whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable

Accepting myself as perfectly created was, most assuredly, the missing piece of a very confusing puzzle.

The 8th verse speaks to seeing the truth, the light, the love. The 9th verse speaks to action. Do love.

In these words exists the encouragement to do those things that are *excellent and praiseworthy*.

Those things that empower and enable a person to do love.

They call me by name. They speak the truth. They shine the light. They unleash the love.

And [the God of] peace will be with you.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (KJV)

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

I read this through a gender inclusive lens (standard operating procedure).

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new.

Then my definition of being *in Christ* has evolved to a place that is based more in how one behaves, as opposed to what one believes.

Alas, love is a verb, and behavior that *in Christ* is love.

So, when I finally get done taking this verse and constructing a verse that works for me, it goes something like this.

If you do love, your life changes. Completely.

I remember the day this verse was introduced to me in a sermon by Pastor Paul Evans. It was July 9, 2006 and it was my 2nd visit at Metropolitan Community Church of Topeka.

Pastor Paul shared this miraculous idea that opening my heart to loving others would lead to an extraordinarily changed new world.

In the years since that day, I have tried to do love to the best of my ability. Sometimes well. Sometimes not so well.

At any rate, all things are become new.

I could not have known how much my life would change. I could not have truly imagined. Love does change the world.

I can't know if this world will become new, but I want be a part of why things change if they do.

Here's what I do know. If you do love, your life changes. Completely.

That'll do for now.

Proverbs 17:22

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

This may be one of the most important and accurate verses in the Bible when it comes to talking about being transgender.

In truth, it is one of the few verses in the Bible that have anything to do with being transgender.

I know dozens and dozens of TGNC (trans and gender non-conforming) youth from across the country. Every single one of them have one thing in common.

Living authentically is what brings them joy.

How do we claim righteousness by crushing the spirit of a child? Of an adult?

But, God only made man and woman, you might say.

Because God is kind of binary, like that, I would never say.

Every other aspect of Creation has great diversity.

Boy howdy and halleluiaah! Look at the flowers. Look at the birds. Look and every other aspect of human diversity.

But the truth of the matter is that none of that matters. What difference could it possibly make in comparison to the well-being of a child?

There is no decision to make here. Do I want a child with a crushed spirit and dried bones, or a child with a cheerful heart?

Really?

Seriously?

Not the God of humanity I believe in.

If you want to believe differently, please go ahead.

Just don't try to put that bone-drying, spirit-crushing poison on any other human being on the planet and expect me to be silent.

These children don't call you in the middle of the night when they are trying to decide if life is worth living.

Some of them call me.

Some of them call others.

Some of them . . . don't call anyone.

John 3:6 (KJV)

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

This verse, from the passage about being *born again*, is one that I see as highly affirming to authenticity.

It says to me that rebirth is about moving into another realm of thinking and being.

One that is not ruled by earthly needs, but rather by spiritual needs.

One that is not driven by the body, but rather by the soul.

One that speaks to the interconnectedness of humanity, rather than the singleness of the individual.

It might be asked how the interconnectedness of humanity is related to the individual need for authenticity.

It might then be asked if the interconnectedness of humanity is attainable if we are limited to bodily existence, and not set free into spiritual existence - that which is born of the Spirit - reborn.

That is not to say that physical traits can not be mirrored in spiritual existence.

It is also not to say that they must be.

If the rules are determined by the flesh, are they not of the flesh?

How, then, could they be of the Spirit?

Perhaps the only rule that applies is to love one another.

James 1:2 (NIV)

Trials and Temptations

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,
whenever you face trials of many kinds,*

This chapter of James goes on to share that facing trials creates perseverance.

*3 because you know that the testing of your faith
produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish
its work so that you may be mature and complete,
not lacking anything.*

I suppose that it does. Produce perseverance. And patience. Trials and temptations most definitely provide lessons in patience.

Yet, I am believing that perhaps a greater gift of trials and temptations is the opportunities offered to take the experiences from my trials, from my pain, and use those experiences to help someone else who is going through similar trials and pain.

My trials have included desperation, alcoholism, homelessness, being estranged from my son, fear, emptiness, hopelessness, shame, and this list can go on and on and on.

It is not difficult to see that there are many other people whose trials are similar.

I have been greatly fortunate in that I have survived my struggles; even thrived in the aftermath.

I have been greatly blessed by the opportunities to take these difficult experiences and use them to try to help create a world where others might not have to experience them.

Or others might believe that they can survive and thrive.

And in a less imperfect world, they might be empowered to take their experiences and share the same gift with others, as well.

It would be a less imperfect world, indeed.

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

"For I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

This is one of verses I memorized as I was reconnecting to God in those first frightening days of authenticity, more than a decade ago.

My faith has been a source of strength for me. My faith has been a source of courage. My faith has provided comfort and hope and purpose.

I have found light in the midst of darkness. I have known peace when surrounded by battle.

I have seen hopelessness transform into possibility. Possibility become reality.

Now is not a time for despair.

Now is a time to embrace the moment and create the future.

For as surely as the night falls, the sun will rise.

As surely as the storms come, rainbows are being born.

As surely as my heart and soul will experience great pain, love will become the wings of my spirit.

I will hurt.

I will heal.

I will hope, once again.

And I will fly.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV)

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Waking up in St Louis for day two off the Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Leadership Coalition training.

So incredibly honored to be a part of this.

So moved to be with a number of the hundreds and hundreds of the TGNC activists who are working to achieve liberation for our people.

So inspired by the knowledge and commitment of this movement to the fact that working to achieve liberation for our people means working to achieve liberation for all people, because our people are made up of all people.

Finding hope in the shadows.

In unity, there is power.

In truth, there is courage.

In coming together, we heal.

This is a new challenge and a new opportunity.

We are not alone.

We are not abandoned.

We will not be silent.

And we will not surrender our right to live, our
right to love, and our right to do so authentically.

1 Corinthians 13:11-12 (NIV) - Thoughts on Thanksgiving

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became [an adult], I put the ways of childhood behind me.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

I remember celebrating Thanksgiving as a child. It was one of my favorite holidays. It represented love and family and food.

The idea of the first Thanksgiving filled my child's brain in ways that were so far from reality I could not have imagined at the time.

Now we see but a poor reflection.

In the years of my authenticity, I have been shown the true nature of this America. From the genocide of the only true Americans to the establishment of slavery. From the internment of Japanese Americans to the Dakota Access Pipeline. And the so many points in between.

From a previous mayor of my city who determined by the fact that I'm transgender that I can't be a person with values, to a Kansas legislator who posted my photo on Facebook and intentionally misgendered me.

I am no longer seeing a poor reflection. I have seen face to face.

I still love America. I still love Thanksgiving. I love the love and the family and the friends and the food.

I will join with friends and I will be thankful.

But I am no longer a child.

My heart aches for the marginalized and oppressed peoples of America. My soul cries.

The words "manifest destiny" sound very much like the pervasive words "white supremacy", to me.

Even as I am fully known.

Matthew 7:1 (NIV)

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

I don't know about all of that.

I guess I just don't see how anyone could know.

Faith, to me, has no great connection to threats of eternal damnation or promises of eternal life.

Faith, in truth, has little to bear on my thoughts about judgement.

My thoughts about judgement stem more from my thoughts about equality and unconditional love.

Who am I to judge anyone else? I am no better than any other human being.

Who am I to judge anyone else? I have no standing by which to cast the first stone.

And then I must ask, as well - who is anyone to judge me?

I am not suggesting we should do away with laws. Although our justice system could hardly be described as just.

I am not planning to become silent in the face of injustice.

But the answers this world so desperately needs
will not come from dehumanizing others,
including those who dehumanize me.

Faith, to me, begs the simple question.

How can peace be achieved in the absence of love?

I Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV)

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

When I read this passage in the Bible, my first understanding of it was that these were the instructions about how we should love. An impossible challenge for humanity, but something we could strive for.

Years later, I came to understand that in addition to my previous understanding, this passage was about God's love for me, for us, for the world. That in receiving God's unconditional love unconditionally, I might become more able to share love unconditionally.

As my understanding continues to expand, I begin to see these particular words as a source of strength and courage. Everything I had previously been able to comprehend, and so much more.

Love becomes my guiding light. My trusted truth. My sacred shield. My endless hope.

It is both the means by which and the reason why. The question and the answer. The sunrise and the sunset.

Love creates in the face of destruction. Heals in the midst of pain. Bears witness to our purpose on the planet.

Hebrews 11:1 (GNT)

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

How I have longed to understand the mysteries of creation; to have knowledge of this thing we call God.

As though such knowledge actually exists in this life. As if such knowledge is a prerequisite to understanding my purpose in this world.

Sure of what we hope for. Certain of what we do not see.

At a time in our country, and in the world, when there is so much uncertainty, what can we be certain of?

With all the violence and the never-ending fight for equality, hope is hard to come by.

While there seems to be an unprecedented attack on humanity running pervasively through our lives, there can only be one hope, one thing of which we can be certain.

Love is the answer.

Our challenge is to have unwavering faith in love.
Our calling is to lead with love.

Our arsenal, in the battle against the hideous attack on human dignity we are witnessing today, must come from the most basic example of human dignity - love.

Have faith in love. Have faith in the idea that love wins. Have faith that even the smallest, most simple act of kindness can become the most powerful force for change.

In the depths of darkness there is always a spark of light, as long as there is a single beat, from a single heart, that comes from the light of love.

Matthew 22:39 (NIV)

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

One of life's most difficult to give self-permissions, is the permission to be human.

Giving one's self the space in which our own imperfections are not required to be seen as unseemly is both difficult, and requisite to achieving potential growth.

Of my experiences, comes an understanding that my condemnation of my inability to be perfect is more of a barrier to reaching my potential than my inability to be perfect could ever be.

Of course, this understanding shrouds itself in things like bruised ego and preconceived notions of how things are supposed to be.

But once the myth of being perfect yields to the reality of being human, growth happens.

Slowly. Painfully. Steadily. Honestly.

This earth contains the nutrients from which potential is realized. Possibility becomes achievable. Hope becomes reality. The ability to love becomes fulfilled.

We are told to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. I have much to do and much to learn. But that's part of being human.

Deuteronomy 31:6 (NIV)

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

When I lived on the men's side of the rescue mission in 2005, I began going to a little Southern Baptist outreach church not too far away.

I met an 80-year-old retired Southern Baptist minister who preached about love.

He and I would meet once a month and talk about God and the Bible, and he encouraged me to memorize verses. Deuteronomy 31:6 was one of the verses I memorized.

Our monthly meetings continued as I began living authentically. There were some struggles with understanding each other, but not with standing with each other.

I remember those meetings that went on for some time as he respected the woman he came to know.

Deuteronomy 31:6 has special meaning to me. It is the verse I recited to myself, over and over, in June 2007 as I walked to work for the first time as my authentic self.

As I learned it, back then - *Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the*

Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. (KJV)

I dropped the masculine references to God eventually, but this verse still reminds me of that day.

I will not say I wasn't afraid.

I will say I wasn't alone.

Proverbs 2:12-14 (NIV)

12 Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men,

from men whose words are perverse,

13 who have left the straight paths

to walk in dark ways,

14 who delight in doing wrong

and rejoice in the perverseness of evil,

It is not without a sizeable degree of anger, that I read the words above and write the words below.

We live in a world where right and wrong have been juxtaposed as if in some debate about which is right and which is wrong - none more guilty of staging than the corporate media.

Nearly six years of the Brownback regime in Kansas have given me more than a small sense of the upcoming nightmares of the incoming national administration

. . . men whose words are perverse.

The empowerment of hate and the justified fears of the vulnerable are more present than I have ever known them to be.

But let us also see verse 12 - *Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men.*

This is the light in the darkness. This is the hope in despair. Wisdom will save us.

But what is this wisdom?

I should like to think of it as a single light. A single voice speaking love out into the air.

And another light down the street.

Across the nation.

Single lights of different races and abilities.

Different orientations and identities.

Different thoughts and beliefs and experiences and oppressions.

The sameness is the voice of love; unconditional in its existence and infinite in its being.

Single lights drawn together out of the needs of humanity, for humanity.

And then one light becomes two, becomes twenty, becomes a thousand . . .

Matthew 5:44 (NIV)

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

I think, as a human being, I have a tendency to ask questions without exploring the possible answers.

One of the more common questions seems to be:
How could someone do that?

I ask the question. Then I make assumptions about the answer, generally about the moral character of whomever did whatever it is I'm asking about.

It was a comment I read, about an article I read, about LGBTQ teens being kicked out of their homes by parents who don't approve.

How could someone do that?

How could they do that to their own child?

The child they are supposed to love?

Cue the answers (bad parents, religious extremists)

And the best question of all - What's wrong with them?

The responsibility for making change loudly proclaims that it does not belong to me.

It is a sad, sad song.

And I sing it repeatedly,

Reality whispers a different question - Then, to whom does it belong, if not me?

I can't and shouldn't try to speak for any other person on the planet, but to me, the answer is painstakingly clear.

Some of the responsibility is mine.

My responsibility to stand up. My responsibility to speak out. My responsibility to do my best to exemplify unconditional love.

My responsibility to lift up. My responsibility to reach out. My responsibility to do my best to exemplify unconditional love.

Sometimes my best isn't very good.

How do I love those who persecute me?

Because I believe the change we need can only come from love.

Because I can not inspire love without doing my best to exemplify unconditional love.

Sometimes my best isn't very good.

Sometimes it is.

Luke 2:11 (KJV) - My Christmas Post

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

There's a meme I've seen on Facebook; two women affirming their ability to believe in the virgin birth, but questioning their ability to believe there were three wise men.

I'll not spend a lot of time on my opinion about either. It is of no significant importance to me whether or not Jesus was immaculately conceived.

And the *three wise men* may have been a man, a woman, and a person who identified as gender - but it would still have said *three wise men* in the Bible.

But that is not the purpose of this writing or the meaning of this verse (imo).

TBH, It seems the origins of Christmas may have been coopted (just the first time that's gonna happen).

That said:

The Saviour who was born - and there is considerable doubt it was actually December 25th - was the full and complete representation of unconditional, unmistakable, everlasting love.

The arc of the universe.

The star in the sky.

The light in the darkness.

The hope in despair.

The indisputable witness to the ability of all people to come together and love each other with no conditions and no exceptions.

The Saviour. Saving the world from our own selfish ways.

*Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
(Matthew 19:21 - NIV)*

The message of Jesus is unconditional love.

If we remember the Christ-Child, but do not follow his example and teachings . . .

The verse immediately preceding the subject of this writing (Luke 2:10) says, *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."* (KJV)

Good tidings of great joy.

aka Love.

Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Waking up on Christmas eve morning listening to the police sirens that are so common I sometimes don't notice anymore.

This time they're in Central Topeka, maybe over on the Boulevard, headed south. It's the siren sound that I associate with an emergency call.

I can't help but wonder about the lives of others happening across the city on the day before Christmas.

People in life and death struggles. People welcoming new life into the world.

People trying to hold on and people waking to anticipatory joy.

People whose hearts are filled and people whose hearts are breaking.

People living and dying, laughing and crying.

My heart goes out to all of them.

Some of them voted for Clinton. Some for Trump, or third-party candidates, or didn't vote at all.

Some identify as Christian, and some as Jewish, or Muslim, or Agnostic, or Atheist. Or something else.

The entire spectrum of races and ethnicities.

The poor and the rich.

The gay and the straight.

My heart goes out to all of them.

The people in the second half of this post are the same people who are in the first half.

My heart goes out to all of them.

Romans 8:31 (NIV)

*What, then, shall we say in response to these things?
If God is for us, who can be against us?*

I remember believing it was impossible.

I remember the moment that began to change.

That first glimmer of hope.

The moment that I realized I was not alone.

When I was invited to a church and told I would be welcome there.

Those early days when it almost seemed like too much to hope for.

The frightened courage to dare to dream.

The shaky legs and trembling fingers.

The beginnings of authenticity.

The most precious, tiniest forward steps.

The lingering doubts.

The setbacks.

The tears of joy.

The fear and pain.

Those growing moments when I began to believe I was going to make it.

The seemingly impossible moment when I realized that I had.

I remember all of them.

You were there with me.

All of you.

Don't try to tell me that you weren't.

I remember.

Psalm 103:12 (NIV)

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

I lived in the darkness some 30 years of adulthood, and my transgressions were many and shameful.

As I began to put my life back together, one of the most significant obstacles was self-forgiveness.

One of my friends at the time shared this verse with me. He said, “If God forgives me infinitely, I might possibly find it in my heart, to forgive myself at least a little.

Over time, I was able to grow that tiny seed into a reasonable degree of self-forgiveness.

In time, I began to realize that my willingness to forgive others was deeply connected to my ability to forgive myself.

The man who shared this verse with me was an 80-year-old Southern Baptist minister.

He taught me a lot about forgiveness. I taught him a little about authenticity.

As far as the east is from the west.

Genesis 5:2 (NIV)

He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created.

There are a variety of ways in which people view the scriptures.

Some say they are the literal word of God.

Some say the original scriptures, and their meanings, have been lost through translations and transcriptions.

Some say they are open to interpretation, and have representation in both literal meaning as well as a deeper meaning.

Some say that this deeper meaning is individualized, different for each person.

There are, of course, many more ways to view the scriptures.

The question of whether or not the scriptures are open to interpretation would seem to be nuanced by Genesis 5:3-5, which says that Adam lived to be 930 years old.

At any rate, I believe the scriptures speak to each person (or not) individually. They certainly also speak differently to me from one day to the next.

Genesis 5:2 is definitely one verse that has been used to try to deny the existence of transgender identity.

It seems rather peculiar, to me, that it was God's intention to limit the diversity of creation. It is quite certain that no other aspect of humanity is so limited.

I am curious as to why God would choose this one aspect of humanity and leave out the limitless array of diversity that exists within all other aspects. Do you suppose that God is uptight about sex?

It is not uncommon, given my work as a transgender educator, for me to be asked, "Do you think God made a mistake?"

My response to this question is, "No. Do you?"

Not to put too fine a point on it, but here I am; transgender as transgender can be.

Now, if God did not create me this way, then who do you suppose did? Given that you believe God creates us, that is.

Or perhaps another person, who does not live within my heart and mind and soul, is better equipped to determine my gender than I am?

Or perhaps God is not capable of doing things
beyond human understanding?

Faith, on the contrary, tells me that I am perfectly
created and the most faithful thing I can do is to
live my life authentically.

It seems to be more of a display of God's amazing
devotion to diversity than a representation of God's
intent to limit the definition of gender.

*He created them male and female and blessed
them.*

No, God did not make a mistake.

Come to think of it, neither did I.

Matthew 13:3-8 (NIV)

*Then he told them many things in parables, saying:
"A farmer went out to sow his seed.*

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.

Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

I sow the seeds. God grows the garden. I am told to sow the seeds on good ground. But there is more.

Some seeds help create the ground on which they fall.

The seeds of bitterness and anger fall among thorns.

The seeds of love and compassion fall on good ground. I don't always, even often, see the garden grow.

But if I plant the seeds of love and compassion, I
can be sure that the garden will grow.

And someone I may never meet will gather their
own seeds from the harvest.

Romans 8:5-8 (NIV)

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

There are many who think my journey as a transgender woman is a journey of the flesh.

I believe that nothing could be further from the truth. My journey is a journey of the spirit.

A journey of the flesh would have been ruled by the flesh. The journey of the spirit is ruled by the spirit. And my spirit is female.

It was always about the spirit, but it took me more than four decades to figure that out.

Why so long? Because I was being taught by the world that is of the flesh. The world that says things like, “who you are is determined by your genitals.” And yes, those are the ones who are *governed by the flesh*.

Trying to impose anti-trans and anti-gay ideas on the world is, by definition, governance by the flesh.

It is not the LGBT community who is failing to submit to God's law. It is those who champion discrimination against LGBT human beings.

If my spirit tells me who I am, with respect to gender, it is my spirit that should lead the way.

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

Yep, amen, and blessed be.

Deuteronomy 6:5 (KJV)

And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

I might start off my saying that this doesn't say that I need to love the Lord, your God. It says I need to love the Lord, my God.

I do not believe in an angry, vengeful, jealous, punishing God. I do believe in a kind, loving, forgiving, compassionate God.

Why? Because that's the God described by Jesus.

In truth, my definition of God is a 7.1 billion piece jigsaw puzzle and every person on the planet is one of those pieces.

If we fail to embrace any human being, we fail to embrace God.

If we fail to love any human being, we fail to love God.

It's not rocket science. Do love, for everyone.

Romans 14:12 (NIV)

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

In the end, if we do stand before God and give an account of ourselves, it will be based on who we hated, not who we loved.

It will be about who we stopped from living their own authenticity, not whether or not we live our own authenticity.

I will give an account of myself.

It will be filled with many things of which I am not proud.

It will also contain things about doing my best to love unconditionally, trying to learn to live by the teachings and example of Jesus, and doing my best to lift people up.

Matthew 25:31-41 (NIV)

The Sheep and the Goats

31 When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left . . .

This is the passage where Jesus shares explicitly about who goes to Heaven and who doesn't.

There are no words about who you love or how you identify your gender. Whether you attend church or even if you believe in God.

Only words about how you treat other people.

This is also the passage that helps me relate to Jesus' words about loving your enemy and praying for those who persecute you.

I believe that the story of the sheep and the goats has literal meaning - physically feeding the hungry and so on.

I also believe this passage has spiritual meaning - feeding the spiritually hungry, welcoming the spiritual stranger.

In this interpretation, I ask a simple question - Who more needs my love and my prayers than those who persecute me?

It is the intellectual justification for "Love your enemy."

It is the explanation of the basis for unconditional love.

Psalm 23:4 (KJV)

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me . . ."

Life never fails to provide the opportunity to take pain and create love.

The struggles I have endured can become a lifeline for the struggles affecting another human being.

I have come to believe this so deeply that I am able to, on occasion, sense this truth in the midst of the pain.

Every stone that is thrown has the potential to be a stepping stone toward peace, love, and understanding.

Or just another weapon; another destructive step in a never-ending, back and forth display of harm and hate.

Every slander, every slur, every roadblock.

There remains the opportunity to help someone know they are not alone.

There exists a possibility to shine light into the darkness.

Every moment, every breath, every heartbeat.

I will fear no evil.

You are with me.

SECTION TWO
FAITH WRITINGS

Transgender Footprints in the Sand

I don't really see myself as a Christian. I see myself as someone who tries to live - on a daily basis - to the best of my ability - according to the teachings and example of Christ.

You know what I mean. Love my neighbor. Love my enemy. Do not judge. Forgive in the way I hope to be forgiven. Give all I possess to the poor.

I don't see my life as a journey of these ideals. I see my life as a journey toward them - ever seeking to become more able to touch them - never able to completely achieve them - but never wanting to stop trying to get closer than I was able to be in the days or weeks before.



On Valentine's Day, I added a heart pendant to the necklace I wear every day that already had a cross on it. The image of the heart together with the cross made a statement to me about what it means to me to try to live according to

Christian values. Without the love, it isn't really what I hope it to be.

One does not need to identify as a Christian to embrace love. Love is a way of living, not a religious

belief. But I can't see how I could identify with Christian values without devoting myself to learning to embrace the love.

Of course, I mostly fail to live up to these challenges. The good news is that my humanness is expected and forgiven. The God of my understanding knows that I am human - created me as human.

So for me, it follows that I become more able to approach these ideals if I ask for assistance. How do I learn to pray for those who persecute me? I pray for God to help me be more able to see them as God sees them.

How do I believe God sees them? I find that answer in I Corinthians 13: 4-5. *Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.*

I have long believed that this passage describes how I am asked to love. I have come to believe that this passage first describes how I am loved by God. My ability to love others is intertwined with my ability to receive God's love as it is intended - unconditionally.

I am not saying that anyone else needs to receive God's unconditional love to be able to love unconditionally. I am saying that I do. I am human. I am also damaged. I am injured. I have endured a

lifetime of believing that my faith was at odds with my transgender identity. I have come to know that my faith was at odds with my inability to trust God enough to embrace my authentic self.

Who knew? I wish they had told me. Or maybe not. Had I not lived this journey as it was presented to me, I would surely not be at this place at this time. And for the first time in my life, at this place at this time is a place of peace, a time of joy, a journey that seems more in alignment with God than ever before.

It turns out that faith was never a barrier to me being able to live authentically. It turns out that faith is a vehicle upon which authenticity is of great importance.

There are many who tell me that who I am is dictated by the body into which I was born. God tells me that who I am is a gift that was placed in my soul. I have listened to the many. I have listened to God. Somewhere along the way I have made a choice to believe what God is telling me.

In making that choice I also removed the spiritual blockade to being able to receive God's love as it was intended - unconditionally. Now I can get on about the business of learning how better to love others in the way it is intended - unconditionally.

I am at a place in the journey where there are two sets of footprints in the sand. That has not always been so. When there was only one set of footprints in

the sand, I was being carried by God's love. Today, it is completely different. I have found my ability to walk with God. Two sets of footprints in the sand. One set of footprints belongs to me.

Stephanie's Prayer

Dear God in Heaven, I praise You and thank You
For the many amazing gifts with which I have been
blessed. I am truly humbled by Your power and
love.

Thank You so much for opening the doors to
womanhood, and for placing angels along my path to
help me. Please give me the courage and wisdom to
walk joyfully and graciously into this new life.

Let me not forget, that only by Your grace Is my
time to be a woman finally at hand. Keep in my heart
that it is only through faith that we are born again.

I humbly pray that I am a woman who seeks Your
will each day, fulfills her part in Your Heavenly
plan, and makes You smile.

In Jesus' name
Amen

Your loving daughter
Stephanie

*Therefore
If anyone is in Christ
They are a new creature
Old things are passed away
Behold, all things are become new*

~ II Corinthians 5:17

God Stuff

I think that I've begun to understand a little bit about this God thing. The whole concept of God is not actually a concept at all. I was trying to put God into some kind of understandable terminology. I think I do this because I'm human. I was looking for an understanding of God in my head. Looking for God in my head is a little like looking for the Pacific Ocean in my bathtub. Only more so.

I took my choice of human qualities and tried to assign them to God. I tried to put God into words into some nice kind of hold-able thing. Into an easy convenient package that I could pull out when I needed to. Just reach up on the shelf and go, "look what I have."

Sounds pretty silly to me now. I was trying to describe a spiritual presence in physical terms. Looking for God in my head instead of in my heart. Thinking that I had some kind of control over how God should do God's thing. Kind of a, "here God, let me show you" mentality. "This is how I would like to use You today." When I finally decided to try to let God use me, I began to learn how to feel the presence of God. I began to learn how to let God guide me

I know today what it feels like to be closer to God than ever before. I know that I often place things between myself and God. I know that trying to place my human limitations into my understanding of God,

is one of those things. And I know that when I do my best to seek God with my heart and soul, when I am somehow able to momentarily completely trust God, the things that are between me and God are removed. And when I can do that, I am in tune with myself, I am in tune with my fellow person, I am in tune with the universe. With God. And that is peace.

I have come to believe that these few moments of peace that I am able to find today are more wonderful than anything I can possibly have. Still, being human, I continue to struggle with much of this. I plan on being human as long as I breathe. But with God's help, if I truly trust, I will struggle less and be closer to God.

And undoubtedly, the greatest gift I have received from this, or will ever receive, is the ability to sometimes see myself and other people on a spiritual plane.

I once thought that being me was a curse, when it was really a blessing. Those of you who truly open yourselves up to your spirit, receive that blessing, as did I when I opened myself up to my own spirit. And when I open myself up to other people's spirits, I receive that blessing too.

Ironically, one of the people in this world who most helped me to see that, would tell you that they do not believe in a God, at least not in the same way that I do.

In that gift, I discover the difference between spirituality and religion. And what makes it such an incredible gift is this. When my world stops spinning, when all is said and done, the only thing that is really going to matter, is what's in my heart.

In One . . . Split . . . Second

In one . . . split . . . second

Every nerve ending in your entire body is
simultaneously heightened & relaxed, and you feel
more alive than in all the split seconds of a lifetime
before, put together

All the pain, all the hardship, all the wreckage,
instantly cease to be why you can't, and suddenly
become why you must

Fear becomes something to be walked through

The emptiness, the all-consuming nothingness
The ever present absence of the soul, is gone

God says, *I am here, I have always been here, I will
always be here, for you . . . and you finally hear*

When you close your eyes, and you fall to your
knees, and you bow your head, and you softly say
*God, please help me, to be the person, You want me,
to be*

In one . . . split . . . second

Letter to My Soul

Dear soul,

I left you alone, to fend for yourself, in the disaster that has been my life. I turned my back on you. I ignored your screams for the daylight. And then I blamed you for the sadness in my heart, the torment in my mind, and the destruction of my flesh.

I heard you singing, once, when you were able. The song was free and beautiful, full of harmony and love. Yet, I chose to listen to the voices of the world which demanded that your song was not allowed.

When you cried out in pain, I found you responsible for the very pain from which you were trying to save me. Then, when you begged for freedom, you pleaded for life, I silenced your voice by destroying my ability to feel.

Somehow, you did not die. It is perhaps the most profound evidence I can imagine that God was with you, with me, the whole time.

I try to look back and remember when it was any different. Perhaps as a child? I might have done something to help you, to grow you, to make you stronger. But I can't remember. Even as a child.

How could I have been so wrong? To believe that you created all the turmoil, all the pain, all the endless torment.

And when I didn't believe that you were the cause
I believed that it was life, people, God, anyone,
anything, but me.

The day finally came. The day that was silently
perched at the edge of the place where there is no
hope. Inevitably called to take flight as the breathing
of the air became the source of the pain. The day
when there was nothing left. Just the smallest of
sparks and the dark stormy skies. Laced with the
finality of relentless extinguishing rain. Pausing, but
for a moment, as if to take one last morbid look at
the victim about to achieve the despairing death of
alone.

In that moment, the light of God shined on you. The
clouds began to melt away like the disappearing fog
in the morning sun. The nothingness which was left
behind was no match for the instantly reborn spirit of
life, and the beginnings of truth reached out in ever
more beautiful freedom and indescribable peace.

My, how you have grown. I can feel the light which
comes into you as it becomes a shining force of
correctness, a thousand times stronger, a thousand
times brighter, than ever before. Today, and again
tomorrow.

For with the light of God, comes the presence of
God. Shine my soul. Shine.

The voices of the world are still resounding through the air and they find their homes in the souls where darkness continues to hide the way. For you today, the light is the life, the life is the light.

Shine.

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven, But . . .

What would you like to know about Heaven? Will the people who have gone before us be there? Will there be chocolate? Will we have a physical resemblance to our human selves? I suspect that a number of people are interested in knowing how to get there.

Jesus is very explicit about this in Matthew 25. Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Welcome strangers. Clothe those without clothing. Care for the sick. Visit the imprisoned. In particular, the marginalized.

The similarities between the Pharisees of Jesus' day, and the religious leaders who persecute LGBT people today, are so striking that it truly leaves no room for argument. What we as Christians often fail to see, is that these people (the Pharisees and the persecutors) are perhaps the most marginalized of all of God's children, for they are truly separated from God.

So, what does it all mean?

My task is not to respond in kind. My task is to respond with kindness. Any attempt at forcing another human being to change their heart is vain, misguided, and egotistical. Hearts are changed when a person allows another to see God at work in them.

Matthew 5:16 says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your {Creator} in Heaven." My task is not to tell them what to believe, but rather to allow them to see how what I believe is of the light.

How do we get to Heaven? Open the door for someone else.

What will it be like? More amazing than I can possibly imagine. From I Corinthians 13 - "Now I see but a poor reflection, then I shall see face to face."

And I do think there might be chocolate.

The Only Functional Response to Hate

He has changed so much. He has really grown. He is doing good things. These are the words the man said. Talking about me. A couple months ago. At a gathering for celebration of my seven years sans alcohol.

My celebration was ended in a cruel, intentional moment of pure ignorance and prejudice. Evidence clearly concluded that this was no accident. A purposeful act. Intended to bring pain to me. Its mission was accomplished. All I could think of was that I needed to respond, rather than react.

I suppose the interspersing of a breath or two has resulted from the knowledge gained by activism. That effectiveness is not nearly so much a product of reaction, as it is a product of response. And I did respond. Simply making it clear that what had happened was unacceptable, but steering clear of causing additional harm.

The gathering soon came to an end, and true friends who witnessed the inexcusable attack on my soul, came to my side. Needing to know for their own well-being, as well as mine, that I was ok. A particularly wonderful friend suggested that we hop over to the neighborhood coffee bar, and visit for a bit. I was all too happy to receive his genuine act of love.

As we visited for perhaps an hour or two, I began what would be a month long adventure of processing all the things I thought required by those two or three minutes of purposefully-delivered pain.

I had the power. I had the power to bring harm to my perpetrator. Serious, significant harm. Yet I do believe that the only functional response to hate, is love. Through grace greater than me, I chose to do no harm.

A couple weeks later, on Thanksgiving evening, the same friend who comforted me, and a very dear sister-friend, were helping me talk about the things about which I needed to talk. *You might not want to hear this*, she said, *but you might not have a right to the answer you're looking for*. Of course, she was right. I was trying to understand why it had all happened. And she was right. I do not have the right to possess that answer. I was holding onto something that was not mine.

And so, the matter of processing moved from the arena of why did it happen, to the arena of why did it hurt so badly. There was never any conscious thought that what happened was about me, or my womanhood. My mind never considered it. Not even for a single moment. But my heart doesn't always have access to the same information as does my mind.

Another couple weeks later, sharing a meal with my very dear sister-friend, the answer to this question –

which I do have a right to – had become clear. As luck would have it, I find myself attracted to men. If sexual orientation were a choice, I would make a different one. However, I don't get to choose my sexual orientation.

On the rare occasions when I am referred to in the masculine these days, it is nearly always by a man. Almost never by a woman. What my heart believed, that my mind knew was not true, was that this man's inability to see me as a woman was a statement about how all men see me. If a man does not see me as a woman, how on earth will he see me as a person with whom he can share his life.

For a month, my heart held tightly to the idea that my prince would never come because he would not be able to see me as a woman. There is a new mutually-agreed-upon understanding between my heart and my mind. My prince will see me completely as a woman. And he is out there somewhere. Just waiting for the right moment.

I have always been me. I just lived in a very small, dark world for a very long time. I did not become a woman. I stopped pretending to be a man. My, how much different it is, to live in the light. My heart is healed. At least, my heart is healed enough to feel sorrow for a man who still lives in a very small, dark world.

And I still believe that the only functional response to hate, is love. I am blessed to have a great many

people in my world who teach me this on a daily basis. Strange that I should learn more about love by standing up to hate.

I suppose the interspersing of a breath or two has resulted from the knowledge gained by activism. That effectiveness is not nearly so much a product of reaction, as it is a product of response. And I did respond. Simply making it clear that what had happened was unacceptable, but steering clear of causing additional harm.

Transgender Acceptance Simplified: The Air and the Light

In the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes* there is a scene where Evelyn Couch (Kathy Bates) is asking her husband, Ed, if Ms. Threadgoode (Jessica Tandy) can move in with them. She explains how Ms. Threadgoode has changed her life and Ed is all like "It's not going to happen." Evelyn persists and Ed finally asks her, "What has changed?"

She says, "The air and the light." Then the movie goes on without stopping to recognize that Evelyn Couch just said the most amazing thing. What has changed? The air and the light. The air. Every breath I take. The light. Everything I see.

You ask me what has changed since I stopped pretending to be a man and began living as the woman of my soul? The air and the light.

To begin with, there is air now, and there is light. There never was before. Light was non-existent. Every breath contained thoughts of suicide. I could not imagine the day when I could live as my woman self. I could not continue trying to live as the man I never was.

I tried. For 48 years, I tried. I did everything I could think of to learn how to be this man I thought I had to be. I spent a lifetime trying to get my soul to match my body. In the falsehood of that existence, I was unable to participate in life.

I was in conflict with God. Every message I received from society told me that God despised me. I became separated from God. Any hope for me to survive was dwindling quickly.

Then one day, I was invited to a little church. The woman who invited me to the church told me that there were transgender people who went to the church. I did not believe her. I did not believe that there were any transgender people in church.

She told me that there was a transgender support group that met at the church. I had to go see that. I went to the church as Steven, for I was still living as a man. I met another transgender woman, who was living as a woman, and I began to believe that I could maybe live as a woman too.

The following week, I went back to the church and the pastor delivered a sermon on II Corinthians 5:17 (NIV) - "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold, all things are become new."

I was certain that the pastor was preaching at me; telling me that it was okay with God for me to embrace myself as a woman.

Two weeks later, I went to the same church, Metropolitan Community Church of Topeka, as Stephanie. The day before, the woman who invited me to the church took me to a thrift store and bought

me a dress, and a purse, and a pair of shoes. And just the right earrings.

I stuffed them behind the seat of my pickup truck because I was living in a men's halfway house at the time. I couldn't exactly get dressed at the halfway house and drive to the church. So I drove to the church, and sat out in the parking lot, trying to decide if this was the right thing to do.

I was afraid. I knew I would be met with love. I had already seen that. For whatever reason, it still seemed too difficult. But I also knew that this was my chance. That if I didn't take it, I was resigning myself to live in misery for the rest of my life.

I attended church as Stephanie that day. I sat down in the pew and looked up at the cross. I felt truth and self in the eyes of the Lord for the very first time. They passed around the attendance book, and I signed my name, Stephanie Mott, for the very first time.

I can't remember the sermon from that day. I was being me, in front of God and everybody, and it was beautiful. I do remember the communion. After serving communion the pastor who, is a member of MCC of Topeka, put her arms on my shoulders and said, "God, bless your daughter for the faith she has shown in You." And Stephanie was born.

I have never looked back. This is perhaps the most important thing to know. When I stopped pretending

to be male, and started embracing myself as female, light began to shine into my world. I went from being suicidal and depressed to being joyful and alive. What greater evidence could be produced as to the truth of my journey?

In the almost eight years since that day, I have fallen in love with God, and I treasure the opportunities that have been given to me to share God's love in the world; unconditionally.

It is hard for me to understand why anyone would think that it is wrong for me to have embraced Stephanie. You ask me what has changed since I stopped pretending to be a man and began living as the woman of my soul? Every breath I take. Everything I see. The air and the light.

Note: It has now been nearly 11 years since I went to that church. I am 11 years sober.

I went back to college and have received a Bachelor of Social Work degree and a Master of Social Work degree.

I am a member of the Topeka Chief of Police Advisory Committee as well as several other boards and commission- compliments of "The Air and the Light."

Claiming My Religious Right

In the days of my youth, I knew little of the meanings of terms such as the religious right and the liberal left. I was taught to believe in a loving God and that, I have begun to understand, is the greatest fortune of my birth. I was raised by parents who believed in a loving God.

The religious right that is the subject of this blog is not the religious right that comes to mind as these words are used to classify a particular brand of faith. The religious right I speak of, is my right to believe in a loving God. It is a right that was stolen from me. It is a right I have claimed once again.

It is not the right to force my religious beliefs on another. Nor is it a requirement for anyone to embrace the spiritual nature of the universe. In truth, it seems strange to me that the Creator of the universe would be so vain as to require that someone must believe before they are worthy of unconditional love. Not to put too fine a point on it, but adding the requirement of believing in God in order to qualify for unconditional love kind of negates the unconditional part.

It is my right to believe in unconditional love. Why is it that we are so eager to put conditions on God's unconditional love? You have to be straight. You can't be transgender. You have to be Christian. You have to believe. No! Not! None of these things! You just have to be. All that is required to receive God's

love is to be. And if God loves you as you are, so should I.

During the first 30 years of my adult life, I came to believe in a God with whom I found no favor because I was transgender. “Just don’t be that way.” This is the message of a dark religiousness, as though that idea never occurred to me. There is the reality of the tens of thousands of prayers I sent to God, asking to be fixed. Begging to be made right. Praying to be made whole.

If God created any of us, then God created me too. If God created me as a transgender human being, who is anyone to tell me that God didn’t do that? This is the question of dark religiousness, “Do you think that God made a mistake?”. This is my response. “No, I don’t. Do you?”

There is this idea that in order to be religious, you have to be socially conservative. There are various applications of this man-made reality. The religious side and the LGBT side. The religious side and the poor side. The religious side and the immigrant side.

We like to pretend it isn’t so, but these realities also connect to the religious side and the non-white side. The religious side and the disabled side. The religious side and the female side. The religious side and the non-Christian side.

Somehow, we lose sight of the fact that the only people who are benefiting from this “truly religious

equals socially conservative” mindset are the people who have a lot of money and power.

In the meantime, LGBT youth continue to be cast from their homes by parents who do so in the name of religion. Nearly half of all transgender teenagers attempt suicide. And then, many people who consider themselves to be religious have the audacity to claim that they are the victims of bullying. That their rights are being trampled.

The result of all this delusion, is that more and more people are turning away from religion. But here is the deal. I don't want to turn away from religion. I have just as much right to religion as those who see me as a lesser human being.

Here is the other deal. No person gets to tell me that I can't have religion because I don't fit into their delusion. Not anymore. Not today. I am claiming my religious right. And there isn't anything anyone can say that could possibly convince me that God has a problem with that.

Fear and Ignorance Are the Locks

My hope is that by being openly-transgender, people will see our truths more clearly. How sad that any young person would not be able to believe they can be their authentic self. My heart is broken but my resolve is re-doubled again.

I hate the ignorance and the religious intolerance that precipitates actions like the ones chosen by Leelah Alcorn. I hate the fear and the refusal to acknowledge the simple science that aligns with the diversity of God, or nature, or even the science itself. We are all different.

The notion that my body tells my mind and soul who I am on the gender spectrum is utterly absurd. I hate that this simple truth has ever been, or would ever be, a point of contention. It is not possible for anyone other than me to know my gender. But I can not hate the people whose actions and beliefs are at the very root of why a transgender teenager would find it necessary to end their own life.

Believe me, it's not because I don't want to hate them. Every ounce of my being screams out to hate them, to punish them, to destroy their evil wickedness. Every cell in my "XY" body and every cell in my "XX" brain are concurrently exploding in anger and pain.

I have stood in the meeting rooms of city councils and state legislatures and I have listened to person

after person come to the podium to denounce my humanness and the humanness and dignity and value of all people who are transgender. I have spent the wee hours of the morning on the phone with transgender teenagers who are trying to find just one reason why their lives have meaning; why they shouldn't just end their pain.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the dynamics of effective change. "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Jesus understood the same thing. "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44)."

Hate is not the answer. Hate will never bring about the change we hope to see. Only love can open the doors that are locked. A few years ago, I began to understand what was needed to open these doors, and I wrote these words that have sort of become my mantra:

Knowledge and information are the keys to acceptance and understanding. Fear and ignorance are the locks. When one person shares, a key is placed in a lock. When one person listens, the key turns and the lock opens and another human being has a bright new shiny key. Together, one person at a time, we change the world.

Where does the hate stop? Should we all hate Rush Limbaugh, and Bryan Fischer, and Tony Perkins? Should we hate the HRC for abandoning transgender

people in 2007? Should we all hate John Boehner for not putting ENDA up for a vote?

Where does it stop? Should we hate all the people who believe being gay or transgender is a sin? Should we hate the people who don't have a problem with LGBT, but go to the polls and vote for candidates who do have a problem? How is all of this hate going to make things better?

I know that the road to change is paved with the bricks of love. I have seen it in my own journey as doors that would seem to be locked forever have opened and light has replaced the darkness that lived there before.

Please don't misunderstand me. Love is not quiet. Love is not hidden. Love is not a way of seeing things. It is, it must be, a way of doing things. My friend Caela, who is the pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Manhattan, Kansas responded to my Facebook post that is repeated as the opening paragraph to this blog.

She said, "Resolve is strengthened to do better, to do more, to love loudly." This is the answer. It is the only answer. Perhaps we could try to find a way to love those who harm us. It is the only possible response that will bring about the change we hope to see.

Last year, I started the Transgender Faith Tour. I was able to visit several faith institutions in Kansas,

Oklahoma, and Missouri and share this message of love. I saw doors open that seemed to be locked forever. This next year is already promising possibilities for visits to churches in Arkansas and Florida, perhaps more.

The last thing we need to do is to hate those who harm us. The only thing that can make it different is unconditional love. Does your institution of faith have the knowledge and information it needs? Maybe, someone like me could come to a church like yours and place a key in the lock. Maybe, if even one person listens, the key will turn and the lock will open.

Trans and Gender Non-Conforming: No Longer Afraid of the Light

“Hello darkness my old friend. I’ve come to talk to you again.” These words from the Simon and Garfunkel song, *The Sounds of Silence*, are a perfect description of the first forty-eight years of my life. The darkness offered the comfort of familiarity and the certainty of anticipated pain.

Throughout those 48 years, I believed that this darkness had been thrust upon me. Gifted to me, as it were, by a society that prefers to keep the non-conformers locked up in places where they can’t be seen. Being transgender and living authentically is the definition of non-conformity.

Looking back from some 10 years after I left the darkness, I see that as much as the darkness was thrust upon me, I also wrapped myself up in it. Darkness was my security blanket. It protected me from things imaginably and assuredly worse. My relationship with the darkness was the food stuff of survival. It was also the lock on the door that led to the light.

Had you asked me, back then, if I was afraid of the darkness, I would have thought you less sane than myself. “Of course I’m afraid of the darkness! Can’t you see what it is doing to me?” Should you ask me today, I would have a different thought, “No, not afraid of the darkness. Afraid of the light.”

I am not afraid of the dark. Half a century of living in darkness has its way of providing that comfort of familiarity. The thing that is so different, is that I am no longer afraid of the light. The light was unfamiliar, unknown and uncertain.

But within the light was the promise of authenticity. The dignity of truth. The existence of oxygen. The correctness of the soul. The definition of truth is not contained in becoming. It is embedded in being. The secret of living is not available through searching. It is released by unconditional love.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but one of the most powerful forms of unconditional love is authenticity. Authenticity is the connection to the light and the creator of the light.

Now I look to the future. The youth of today are creating the path for the youth of tomorrow. The struggle-born seeds of a non-binary society will reveal the fruit of unlimited potential, unharmed spirit, and unbridled capacity for unconditional love. These are the kinds of things that happen when you don't try to limit human identity with expectations of gender. It will be a place where we are not shamed into the darkness. A place where the right to live authentically is embraced by a society that is also no longer afraid of the light.

Why was I afraid of the light? I think it began with the idea that authenticity was only allowed for those who walked freely in the light. When I was able to

look toward the light, there were no transgender people in the light that I could see.

I will say that fear is powerful — powerful when it is the fear of changing — and powerful when it is the fear of not changing. The time did finally come when the fear of not changing became more powerful than the fear of changing.

In that moment, I happened once again to hazard a glance toward the light. And in that moment, I saw someone like me in the light. I began to believe that there might be a place for me in the light. I began to believe that I could embrace myself authentically. And in that moment, everything changed.

It has been a few years. I still visit the darkness from time to time. Maybe a little like going to a high school reunion. A trip back in time. A chance to remember how it felt to believe I was condemned to the darkness.

“Hello darkness my old friend. I’ve come to talk to you again.”

A chance to recognize how much things have changed. A chance to shine a little light into the darkness. Because, you never know. There could be someone there, in the darkness, who might begin to believe that there could be a place for them in the light.

Empowering Transgender Lights to Shine

I have longed, for a very long time, for a space on the planet where my identity — my one-and-only, true-to-my-heart, exactly-who-I-am identity — is free to exist authentically. The history of America and the political disaster known as Kansas tell me the day is coming, but the wait is still substantial. Changes are many. At least as obvious as the positive changes, are the countless examples of spineless monsters who conjure up fears and destroy the lives of people who happen to be transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC).

That said, there is a growing and undeniable force across America that is coming to an ever-greater understanding that this is not a discussion about transgender rights. This is a discussion about human rights for TGNC human beings.

What America is still failing to see, is that this is also a discussion about the right for all people to have a space in which they are able to shine their light. What the world has failed to understand, is that lights not allowed to shine are like birds not allowed to fly, dreams that are forced to die, love that never sees the light of day.

I longed for a very long time for a place to be. But what I needed was more than a place to be. What I needed was a place to belong. A place to grow my heart; fuel my spirit; heal my soul; shine my light.

The cost to humanity, from denying humanity to any of the world's inhabitants, is far greater than the horrors endured by those who are oppressed and marginalized. The cost to humanity includes the millennia-long removal from the universe, of the collective light of every soul whose light never had a chance to shine.

And then we wonder why humanity never seems to be able to crawl out of the darkness.

When we deny a TGNC teenager the right to live in their true identity, we deny that person's future. We deny their hopes and dreams. We deny all the light they might have shined on the world. It affects more than their future. It affects the future of the world.

Whatever brilliance that child might have gifted to humanity has been denied not only to that child. It has been denied to everyone they might have helped, to everyone who will ever love them, and ironically, to everyone who stands in the way of authenticity.

A recently released study by the Williams Institute says, "An estimated 0.6% of adults, about 1.4 million, identify as transgender in the United States." It's not about extinguishing a single light. It's about fully or partially extinguishing 1.4 million adult lights, as well as the just-beginning-to-shine lights of countless TGNC youth.

Just to put that in perspective, the population of San Antonio, Texas is about 1.4 million. That's like

saying, “No one from San Antonio is allowed to add light to the universe. Sorry, your light is not needed here. We’re good. We have all the light we need.”

Maybe we should be empowering transgender lights to shine. Maybe we should be empowering the lights of all marginalized and oppressed people to shine. Maybe we would discover an entirely different world.

So, in the meantime, as society considers the place and purpose of 1.4 million Americans, there is no place for anyone’s disapproval of authenticity. There is no purpose in the destruction of 1.4 million lights.

And just in case you want to tell me what it says in the Bible about this, turn to Matthew 5:14-16.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your [Creator] in heaven.”

Shine on, transgender lights. Shine on.

Transgender in Right Relationship With God

We hear a never-ending, truth-denying, agenda-pursuing chorus of how people should be in right relationship with God. There are at least as many opinions about what that means as there are people saying it should be.

The majority of those opinions seem to focus on who should love whom and what gender we should understand ourselves to be. The opinions, of course, come with a caveat — claiming knowledge for all people of the only appropriate answers to these questions. The answers, of course, have no true relationship to being in right relationship with anything — other than perhaps oppression and fear.

I find it important to say that I don't give a flying rat's backside if anyone is or is not in some kind of right relationship with whomever or whatever they choose to believe in, or not. That's not my job.

I don't care who loves whom or what gender people understand themselves to be. That's also not my job. My job is to do what I think is right for me. Other people can look at that and decide if they want to do something similar, or something different, or some combination of the two.

That said, I spent many years of my life trying to fulfill my understanding of being in right relationship with God. At the time, that meant trying to be someone who was not me. It meant trying to

live a lie instead of embracing the truth. It often meant despising myself instead of loving myself. Not to put too fine a point on it, but how is that being in right relationship with anything?

It took an incredibly long time for me to realize that — for me — being in right relationship with God was about giving God enough credit to believe I was loved exactly as I was. All of me. Not just the body I was born into. But also the spirit I was gifted with.

I believe while I was trying to be someone other than who I was, I was in wrong relationship with God. Go figure. Living authentically might actually be one of the ways in which I can begin to be in right relationship with God.

Two words from the last sentence — “authentically” and “begin” — have much to say about relationship. Authentically speaks to bringing your true self to the world. Begin speaks to the idea that being in relationship — with God, with the earth, with the universe, with humanity — is not an achievement. Being in right relationship is a journey.

So now I want to mention this passage in the Bible that speaks clearly about how to be in right relationship with the New Testament God. That would be the Matthew 25: 31-46. It talks about things like feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger. It does not talk about who should love whom or what gender we should understand ourselves to be.

About the journey — living authentically while devoting myself to lifting up the marginalized and oppressed — all of the marginalized and oppressed — would seem to me to be a key to being in right relationship with whomever or whatever is important to me.

There are also some words not present in this passage in the Gospel of Matthew. The words you will not find are words that have to do with telling anyone else how they should live their lives or creating obstacles to people being able to live their lives authentically.

Am I in right relationship with God? Sometimes. More often than ever before. I have come to understand that being in right relationship with anything or anyone is a journey down a path where I try to be more in right relationship with myself. Am I living authentically? Am I working to lift up the marginalized and oppressed?

I would say that I am mostly traveling on the right road. The relationship is the journey. I'm still writing the book. This particular chapter gives me hope for a different world. I don't know if I am in right relationship with God. I am finally pretty close to being in right relationship with myself. That'll do for now.

