

## Never Too Old.

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Jan. 21, 2023

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca.

Good Morning, everybody.

When Tom asked me to do this today, he left it wide open as to what I wanted to do.

And I'm kind of hitting on the topic of never too old to do anything, actually. I came out at the age of 68, five years ago, six years ago now. And it was a big change for me. Part of what I'm reading here today is something I wrote three or four years ago on what I was calling my name day.

Parts of this may be triggering to some, so it's a warning. There is talk about suicide and depression in here.

Just thinking about my parents today, my mom, Charlotte, passed away in 2003. She was 70. My dad, Bill, passed away in 2016. He was 90. After his death, I started reassessing my own life and trying to figure out why I was so angry at the world and sick of my own life. I started a slow spiral down into a deep depression. My work suffered as well as me making things rough at home.

2018 saw many things happen. I planned the suicide. I wanted to stop the hurt and the pain I felt and was causing. And then in late 2018, I called the Trans Lifeline anonymously and talked to a trans woman counselor for a couple hours. She gave me hope and saved my life.

A month later, I came out to the world as Branwen Drew. And the last two years have

been a time of tremendous change and growth for me. The majority of people I see every day have known me as Branwen. Those that have known me much longer now see me as Branwen and seldom mention who I was known as before May 2018, except for relatives, maybe.

I had my muse and discovered that I am a talented poet. I had never written any poetry before coming out as trans, but I've been doing artwork all my life. My art and poetry has been in various online and print publications. I'm happily married to the love of my life, which will be for a year in March, Sarah Tech.

I love my life and the people in it. I am hopeful for the future and grateful to be alive in the part of the future. I am fortunate. Many others coming out of the closet later in life are not.

Based on my own experiences, here is what I found that's needed by those leaving the closet in an older age. And there is really a lack of detail in this, because it all depends on what you are already doing.

We need a sense of community. I had never been part of the gay community before coming out, so that was an entirely new culture to me. I had lots of gay friends and had many friends that had died from AIDS, but it was really never a part of that culture until recently.

The hardest thing was finding a safe space. At the time, I was living in McLean and Couldn't find a safe space around here, not even in the church that I belonged to there at the time, the UCC church in McLean, despite them being supposedly a supportive

church.

The biggest thing I needed was time. Time to look at who I am, what I do, where I can find help, where I can find community. Growing up in Ithaca was a great experience. As they say, we are five square miles of fantasy in the middle of reality. And then the phrase Ithaca is gorgeous, which it is. I wish I had known what I know now back when I was younger, but at the time I was searching and constantly searching. Still searching.

The biggest thing that people in the community can do is to be allies. All of us that are in the trans and in the gay communities don't just want your tolerance. We want your acceptance. It doesn't matter why we are the way we are. We don't even know that. So that's one question I've never been able to answer.

And the one I don't even try to answer anymore.

Be an ally. When you are out in the community and you see someone being harassed because of who they are, step up, be loud, be proud, for whatever reason. That even happens here in Ithaca. I believe it wasn't too long ago there was a trans woman who rode a bicycle all over Ithaca and was killed in an accident. I remember seeing her when I was younger around here when I was visiting, and she got all kinds of harassment. It was from people who should know better.

Even within the gay community, there is very little understanding of the trans community. We're seen as an outlier. There's around 1% of the world population is trans or non-binary, somewhere on the spectrum. And again, all we want is acceptance, not tolerance.

Recently there's been a lot of bad stuff going on around the country, lots of anti-trans

legislation. As of yesterday, there were 15 days into the legislative cycle, and there are over 300 bills all around the country that want to restrict the trans population in some way. Either from medical care, or from even using a restroom, or even being recognition of who we are. Recently, there's several states that have moved from medium risk to high risk. This

is based on a map from a journalist, a trans journalist, on her blog on the web. It's Erin in the Morning. She generates a map every couple of days of what's considered safe states.

Recently, Utah moved from medium risk to high risk. Indiana moved from a medium risk to high risk. New Hampshire moved from a low risk to a medium risk. New Hampshire is passed two anti-trans bills. Several Democrats have voted for it.

Nationwide, the risk is growing and growing, and the biggest enemy out there is one whose name I will not mention. I guess we could call him Valdamort. But increasingly there are bills targeting trans adult care and campaigning by Republican presidential candidates to do more. If they gain all three branches of federal government, you can watch trans rights, gay rights, everything the women's movement worked for, everything that the racial justice people worked for, Martin Luther King worked for, and you can just watch that slowly go down the drain.

It reminds me of early 1930s in Germany and the rise of Hitler because of so many people just sitting back and being a good citizen. And if you don't, if you're not participating, you're part of the problem. You are the problem, and you can be the cause of the problem.

I have hopes for the future. I'm really hopeful for our youth. I'm amazed at the kids I see growing up now. I've worked with youth in Utica and several friends of mine that are in

the schools, in Rome, New York, that I know don't care what their gender is or what their orientation is. The only people that care are the people that don't like what they're doing.

The other thing is all the social and political action that's available out there. This past week, the National Center for Transgender Equality and Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund merged into a new organization calling themselves Advocates for Trans Equality, A4TE. NCTE, which does a survey every five years of the trans community, and it's the only survey of its kind in the country. They did one in 2020.

I would suggest, very adamantly suggest, is donating to the trevor.org, even more so than any of the other groups, because that's where our hope lies, is with the youth. And within the Unitarian Universalist Church, support the LGBTQ + Uplift Ministries. That is something we can all do. I was involved early on in setting up online a safe space for young people, and that has taken off. I'm not involved much in that anymore, but it's fantastic what all these young people are doing.

My hope is that love will win out. There is a lot we can do. We need to maintain and move forward on what we've gotten in New York State. I worked on the lobbying for the bills that finally gave trans people the same rights as everybody else in New York State. The right to marry, housing, and so on is no longer by executive order, but is in state law and the statutes. It cannot all just disappear overnight. It took a lot of hard work, generations of work, to get that through. So get out there and vote. Don't be quiet. Thank you.

Branwen Drew