

When I was a boy

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Biblical language about God often reflects the patriarchal cultures in which that language was crafted, but every once in a while we get a glimpse of a God who transcends male identity. In Isaiah, God comforts us like a nursing mother comforts her child. Jesus said that he wished to gather up the people of Jerusalem like a mother hen gathers up her chicks. In Proverbs, God gives birth to wisdom before manifesting creation.

Genesis 1 says: Humankind is created “in the image of God. . . male and female.” (For Bible references about inclusive and expansive language in reference to God, see [this](#)). Classic complementarian interpretations of this text suggest that God’s image is made complete when a male person and a female person join together in marriage. But what if both the male and female elements of God are already present in the image of God inside each of us?

In my church we often use poetry, music and art to explore biblical stories and themes. Recently we read aloud portions of a song by Dar Williams called “When I Was a Boy.” Williams reflects on growing up with the social freedoms granted to boys, and how that freedom slipped away as she was pressed into female gender roles.

“When I was a boy, I scared the pants off of my mom/ Climbed what I could climb upon/ And I don't know how I survived,/ I guess I knew the tricks that all boys knew. . . I was a kid that you would like, just a small boy on her bike.”

She tells the man that she is “with” that since he’s “the boy” now and she has to be “the girl,” that he’s got all the power. He surprises us by answering, “Oh no, no, can't you see/ When I was a girl, my mom and I we always talked/ And I picked flowers everywhere that I walked./ And I could always cry, now even when I'm alone

I seldom do/ And I have lost some kindness/ But I was a girl too./ And you were just like me, and I was just like you.”

The freedom to be a whole person is lost when we limit one another with gender expectations. All of us exist along a continuum of girlish and boyish traits and tendencies and preferences. But the pressure to conform to a narrow range of behavior can be intense and sometimes debilitating, ranging from teasing to severe violence to put you “in your place.”

Wholeness consists, however, in our coming together with other human beings regardless of gender, and in loving one another as God first loved us. The seed of wholeness is inside us in the form of the image of God. And that seed that will blossom mightily if we water it with love and community and companionship. “Bone of my bone” and “flesh of my flesh” suggests to me a shared humanity. We are all made of earth (*adamah*) and the breath and spirit of God (*ruach*).