

On restrooms, gender, and fear

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My wife and I have a joke. We tell it when we are out in public, at an airport or a restaurant or concert, and I need to use the bathroom. When I stand up to find a restroom I say to her, “Okay, honey, if I’m not out in five minutes, come look for me.”

We always laugh but, actually, it’s not that funny. The “joke” plays on the fact that I’m a gender non-conforming person, and bathrooms are not safe spaces for me. This has always been true, but in the current political climate, when states are passing laws regulating the use of bathrooms by trans and gender non-conforming people, we’ve been telling this joke more.

Sometimes gallows humor is all you have.

I am female-bodied, but dress in a way that fits my own understanding of my gender identity which, while not male, definitely trends masculine. Dressed down I wear jeans and oxford shirts with baseball caps. Dressed up I prefer khakis and dress shirts. Bow ties are my favorite accessories. And my hair is cut short enough that the woman who cuts my hair charges me for a men’s cut because she doesn’t think I should have to pay more than a man for the same haircut.

Like I said, though, I’m not male. Unlike my trans brothers who have transitioned female-to-male, I have been clear that that was not the right path for me. I’m happy to be Emily and to live in my body. How I dress and carry that body, though, is often at stark contrast with what the world expects. It’s been that way since I was a three year old telling my mom that overalls were better than dresses.

So, when I go to use the women’s bathroom, the bathroom of the sex to which I was assigned at birth, things get interesting. Unlike trans men and trans women who wish to use a bathroom for the sex that is different from the one they were assigned at birth, but which fits their true gender, I just want to use the women’s room. But like my trans brothers and sisters, this is not always a safe experience for me.

Here’s what happens: I walk up to the bathroom, with its picture of a woman in a dress, and I push open the door. Sometimes it starts there. A woman is coming out and she looks at me, looks up at the door, and looks confused. I push on anyway. Sometimes she will helpfully say, “I’m sorry, sir, this is the women’s room.” I have learned to say, “Yes, I know,” and keep walking without waiting for a response.

I use the bathroom as quickly as possible. I don’t know what the supporters of bathroom bills think trans and gender non-conforming people are doing in there, but I can assure you it’s not exciting. In fact, I can testify that most of the time we get out as soon as humanly possible. Then I wash my hands, carefully avoiding the mirror-reflected gazes of the woman next to me. I say nothing, unless something is said to me. And then I leave.

I am lucky in that the worst that has ever happened to me in a women’s room is that I’ve been embarrassed. Friends of mine have not been so lucky. One was pulled out by force by a man who believed she was going to harm his wife. He had thought she was a man. Other friends have come out to find a someone standing with a police officer who then demands to see their ID. And I’ve certainly thought about how to best defend myself if someone gets violent. Everyone I know who is gender non-conforming has had those thoughts.

That's why I try to avoid public bathrooms as much as possible. Believe me, if there is any way to get around it, I will. I suspect this is true of most trans and gender non-conforming folks. For all the fears around us wanting to use the bathroom, the reality is that we're far more afraid to use it than you know. I've learned not to drink water before I have to fly in order to avoid airport restrooms. I change my clothes before I get to my gym. I've walked back to my house rather than use a restaurant bathroom.

Sometimes, though, I get lucky. I'll find a place with gender-neutral, single-stall restrooms. That's like hitting the bathroom lottery. When I came to the church I now serve, I was thrilled to find three gender-neutral bathrooms on the first floor and another upstairs. But this is rare.

The reality is that I spend far more time thinking of bathrooms than I ever thought possible. And for someone who grew up hearing that it was good manners to not talk about anything related to bathrooms, writing about this is particularly odd territory. But now is a *kairos* time in bathrooms. This is the time when we have to tell our stories, stories that maybe even our closest friends don't know.

And so, friends, I'm telling you this story. I'm telling you that no trans or gender non-conforming person wants to use the bathroom for any other reason than you do. I'm telling you that this has never been about sexual predators (who don't need bathrooms to hurt people and who won't be discouraged by an anti-trans bathroom law), but about harming trans people. I'm telling you that I'd like to spend a whole lot less time thinking about bathrooms than I do.

And I'm also telling you this: I'm telling you that going into a restroom makes me afraid. I'm a former rugby player, I've studied judo, and I routinely dead-lift more than most grown men weigh. But multiple times a week I am too scared to take care of a basic human need in a public place.

The other night I read about a woman who has decided to bring her gun into restrooms from now on in order to "protect" herself from "perverts" who come in. To be clear, that meant anyone that she thought didn't belong in a women's room. Shoot first. Ask questions later.

I joked with my wife, "So, that's how I'm going to die. I'm going to go into a Target bathroom with that woman and she's going to think I'm a dude and shoot me."

This time my wife didn't laugh.

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