

Upfront

It's hot-button topic, boiling on high heat in the current political climate. Experience suggests it's best (or easiest) that I avoid such third rails in this magazine. But sometimes I can't help myself. So, let's take a few moments together to consider the concepts of gender and sex.

When I'm curious about English words, I consult the Oxford English Dictionary. I mean...they invented the language, didn't they? Google "gender oxford English dictionary" and this is the first result: "Gender is the distinction of sex. There are three: the masculine, the feminine, and the neuter." The Anglo-Normans (i.e. Frenchish-Brits backwards) included "gendre" in their lexicon around 1125. The English, influenced by the A-Ns and Romance languages that ascribe gender modifiers to all nouns (more or less), began saying and defining "gender" in the late-14th century. For half a millennium, gender was, essentially, a his-and-hers thing.

Click the link to the OED Google search result and you'll learn that a psycho/sociological construct of gender formed (despite the belief by some that our domestic society is regressive) in the U.S. around 1945. (What better way to celebrate saving mankind from darkness than a coming-out party 500 years in the making?) This American reimagining of gender is a "state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones."

Beginning with the post-War American reframing of the now-obsolete (in some circles) notion of gender, we've transitioned. Indeed, we've come a long way, baby (and I mean "baby" in a gender a-specific sense, so remain calm). According to the World Health Organization, "gender refers to characteristics that are socially constructed...it varies from society to society and can change over time...(it) is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as intersectionality."

That's a lot to take in. Incidentally, mentioning the conversion of gender and gender identity at the junction of global discrimination reminds me of the moment at the end of a pharma commercial when they say, "Don't take drug X if you are allergic to drug X." Too many words.

Okay, so gender is "fluid," much to the chagrin of Riley Gaines, I suspect. But what about sex? I've hit my free-usage limit with OED,

so let's try Merriam-Webster. "Either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and are distinguished respectively as female or male, especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures...the sum of the structural, functional, and sometimes behavioral characteristics of organisms that distinguish males and females." How quaint.

We've explored gender and sex, let's complete the circuit with "gender identity," then. According to The Human Rights Campaign, gender identity is "one's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither," which can be "the same or different from their assigned sex at birth." Based on legacy assignment protocols, I doubt there are many original-neithers later planting the male or female flags.

This is the point in the essay where I ask myself, "Where are you going with this?" like you did a few paragraphs back.

I was assigned male; I identify male; and I'm grateful for both. The reasons for my gratitude are often simple and self-indulgent, like short public-bathroom lines. I reference conspicuous (and stereotypical) dietary differences between the sexes in this issue's Smells Like Sunday food feature...and I love to eat...a lot. But the thing that spurred my ruminations regarding my unearned male-privilege: Valentine's Day.

Recently, I bought my wife a few gifts to celebrate cupid's influence. Granted, they were cute and clever, as she affirmed. Yet the biggest bang for my buck was her reaction to my gift-wrapping job. I bought some aesthetically appealing paper at a store within walking distance of my house. I stuffed four incompatibly shaped items into a slightly mangled box that Amazon provided a few days prior, and I had saved from its imminent recycle bin demise. I gathered tape and scissors, and I went to work. The end-product was messy, at best...like a pre-nap kindergarten art project gone awry. Uneven fold-over end-pieces insinuating a perverted oval despite the contents' foundational square. A visible sliver of cardboard peeking through because I cut too small a piece from the paper roll, but I didn't have enough left over to make a second attempt. The travesty was averted by throwing the eyes: Two cards, affixed with frame effect, one on the other, to the least-bad side of the ensheathed box. And so it went – I was a hero, although every package ever wrapped by a woman or girl looks infinitely better than the best-of-all-time produced by a man.

It's not fair; I know. But life's not fair. As a gift-wrapping guy, I praise (posthumously, for him), the words attributed to professor and clergyman (of course this thought would come from a man) Henry van Dyke, Jr., "It's the thought that counts."



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