MCC Trans-Etiquette

So, Does this Mean You're Straight?
Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Human beings are sexual beings and they fall on a wide spectrum of sexual orientations. It is important to note that, although gender and sexuality are connected in some ways, they are distinct human expressions of identity and behavior that are not necessarily interdependent. A person’s sexuality does not have to change when gender identity changes. And, it can change. For example, a transwoman who remains married to her long-term wife will not necessarily identify as a lesbian. Nor will her wife, necessarily. A transgender or gender-variant person who does not identify predominantly as either male or female will not necessarily find any of the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual meaningful.

Additionally, the various acronyms that we use to identify our communities (for example, LGBT or LGBTQI) demonstrate a common goal of working toward sexual and gender justice, reflect our similar experiences of oppression and violence – and also in some ways perpetuate the assumption that gender and sexuality are the same. “Fake-T” is a term that some transgender folks and allies use to refer to the unfortunate times that “trans” is included only in name. Be careful to examine your theology, lessons, other teaching tools, and ways of thinking to be sure that the unique issues and concerns that are relevant to gender identity and expression are being considered.

To prepare:

- Practice the art of un-assumption; refraining from making assumptions about another person’s sexual orientation. Think about a topic of concern for our communities (for example, marriage equality or anti-discrimination laws).
- Try to come up with some examples of how gender identity is uniquely impacted and what particular considerations should be made to take gender into account.

In Conversation:

- Do not make assumptions about another’s sexual orientation.
- Ask transgender people if they will share some of their thoughts with you about how a particular topic, such as equality in marriage, impacts their life.
If These Walls Could Talk: The Journey of the SO (Significant Other)

The world of the SOFFAs (significant others, family, friends, allies) of transgender people can be very difficult in the midst of gender changes. Sometimes, people will communicate things about a transgender partner to their significant other that they wouldn’t say directly to the transgender person. Often, this is because of discomfort or bias against the transgender person. People may comment on how the transgender partner looks, sounds, or dresses, or even make comments about the couple’s sexuality. Some transgender people and their partners are told that they are no longer welcome in someone’s home or in a certain community because of their gender identity or expression. Also, some more angry individuals may blame the SOFFA for the transgender person’s journey with gender.

Be conscious of the SO’s feelings. Gender changes and metamorphoses can be incredibly stressful for the partner of someone who is transgender. Especially during the early stages of gender change, being transgender is often the main topic of their life. Remember, the SO is just as much in transition as the transgender person and will also need emotional support from friends, family, coworkers, and others in their life. Also, understand that they may not want to talk about their experiences at all. Be respectful of their wishes. Being the partner of a transgender person can be extremely lonely in arena’s outside of the primary relationship.

Additionally, when one partner experiences and undertakes gender changes, these differences and new understandings also impact the identity and self-understanding of their partner. Sometimes a partner is unable or unwilling to stay with their transgender lover.

Our senses of ourselves are often fundamentally important to our process of being and interacting in the world. A common example is this: Someone from a couple who identified together as lesbians when they met begins to identify as transgender and begins to transition as a man. The lesbian partner finds that she is uncomfortable and unable to be understood by others or herself as a straight woman. The transmale partner finds himself encountering a breakup at a time when he very much needs support and love.

It’s important to understand in these difficult situations that both partners have identities and senses of self that are important and essential to their way of being and moving in the world. It is not necessary for their circles of community to take sides or privilege one identity and experience over the other. Remember that both are going through the difficulty, and sometimes pain, of change and loss, and both will need loving support. Do not assume that a partner is automatically trans-phobic or callous because they cannot remain in the relationship.

To prepare & Conversation:

Change the subject every once in a while to focus on the partner and what they are interested in and pursuing in life. This will help support the partner and give them a short rest from the intensity of the change in their life.

Do not assume that a partner is automatically trans-phobic or callous because they cannot remain in the relationship. Practice not taking sides. Practice offering support without bad-mouthing the other partner.