

Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love Interview Series
A Ministry of That All May Freely Serve
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Sharon Stuart

“Today, I am Sharon Stuart, and I am a Bi-gendered Transgender person. To be Bi-gendered is to have a feminine presence and a male presence with pretty much equal value and equal stress on both. So I’m comfortable as a man, and I am comfortable as Sharon.”

“...if you struggle to liberate somebody else – and you see their struggle as yours even though you’re not part of it, you’ll liberate yourself, eventually.”

Transcript:

I do lot of classroom work, so I’m one of these instructors that walks around and gestures and so, I don’t think that’s going to work in this....

Students ask me questions and I love to answer student questions...

My name is Sharon Stuart, and I also have a male name. My male name is Tom Heitz.

Today, I am Sharon Stuart, and I am a Bi-gendered Transgender person. To be Bi-gendered is to have a feminine presence and a male presence with pretty much equal value and equal stress on both. So I’m comfortable as a man, and I am comfortable as Sharon.

I spend most of my time as Tom, because I am male, biologically; I have had a feminine identity and a sense of myself as a feminine person since I was very young. I’m an only child, and of course, I was born in 1940, and I had no frame of reference for my feelings, really. So, I grew up, it was a bit of a struggle growing up.

But to be Bi-gendered is very much like being bilingual. If my native language is English and my native sex and gender is male, Tom is Tom. If I learn to speak French as a second language, and I learn a second gender, you never speak that second language quite as well as you speak the native language, but if you spend a lot of time in France, you can speak French pretty well. So, that’s – it’s very equivalent really, to me gender is a social-cultural language. And, I had a long timeline as a transgendered person – in my – there’s my early childhood and teen years are one thing – but, I joined the first - the Transactivist Movement in 1967, so to speak, by joining a group in Los Angeles, California which is one of the first groups of people, men particularly, to come out to the extent that they could gather in groups, socially

for an afternoon or an evening and discuss what they were doing and why and what the significance of it was.

And, that group was founded by Virginia Prince, became known as “Triads,” and became one of the larger groups.

I was in the US Marine Corps at the time. I put my Marine Corps career in jeopardy by doing this, but I was dealing with gender issues of my own and this was a way to explore that. And, I managed to spend more than 8 years in the Marines without getting busted. I did not go to Viet Nam. I’m a Viet Nam Era veteran not a Viet Nam Veteran. I was a lawyer at that point and doing a lot of work at Camp Pendleton, and I taught at Naval Justice School for an additional three years, and I then was in the Reserves after that.

While I was in Naval Justice School, teaching in 1972, “Lesbian and Gay People” came out of the DSM, the Diagnostic Service Manual [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual] and “Gender People” went in. And, as an instructor at Naval Justice School, I had to teach lawyers coming into the Navy and Marines about the military regulations involving Gays and Lesbians and that, now they were going to have to be dealt with differently. They couldn’t just be administratively discharged anymore because they were sick. And, the Marines, the military, used the DSM not as a diagnostic tool but as legal tool to penalize people for who they were. And, now they couldn’t do that, so they had to find other ways, and eventually that led to “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” over a long period of time, and there were a lot of problems...

But I became one of the experts in that area even after I left, the Marines and Naval Justice School people would consult me about it from time to time, and I began to – during this period – I – as the Transgender Movement emerged, I emerged with it as a Transgender person.

In the early days of the Transgender Movement, the street credibility rested with the Transsexuals, so if you went and got your sex changed and, and they were all men at this point becoming females, it largely meant you had to leave your family to do that, and it was a...

There came a point where I got fired from a job in Canada because I was Transgender. I was discovered – and basically what they did was they didn’t renew my contract. I went up there for five years of work as a land immigrant.

I had married in 1964, while I was in law school, and my – I didn’t have any frame of reference for gender at that point, and my wife – I didn’t tell her until we were four or five years into the marriage and had a child. And, we eventually had three daughters. And, my struggle was I didn’t want to leave my family; I didn’t feel like I needed to punch my ticket by having my sex - my genitalia changed. I was different in that respect from some my cohorts, and I don’t disrespect them. They had their decisions to make, but...

My wife didn't sign up for a Transgender husband; she signed up for a guy, and I – there came a time when I lost that job in Canada, I still had a consulting position, and I had the fit work for about six months to finish that job, and I was working on my own. And, so I lived as a woman for six months. It was like, what they used to call a “real life test” to see if you can really do it. So I got to speaking French, so to speak, I got to speaking feminine pretty well, I could go around and “pass.”

I was doing pretty well with it, and the Canadians at that point had decided to give everybody free sex change operations. They have socialized medicine up there, and that was a new program and they were recruiting people, because they had to justify all this money the government had given them.

So, I signed up for an interview at one point, I had friends who were doing this or considering it, and – consulting job finished. It came time to go back to the United States or stay in Canada. It meant losing my family if I stayed and changed, and I agonized over this decision for weeks and when it came time to make that phone call, my wife and kids were back in St. Louis with her family, I agonized about that decision – I thought about it all day, I just couldn't think of anything else. And, when I made that call, I don't think I knew at that point what my decision was.

When I heard my wife's voice, Ginger's voice, and that baby, I had a new baby just a few months old, I just – I couldn't do it. This wasn't about me, I – it was about our family. So, a couple of days later, I loaded the Volkswagen camper up and went back to St. Louis.

And, I've never been back to Canada since...

I eventually got another job. I was one of the founders of the Transgender Law Conference – a group of lawyers that gathered in the 1980's first, and then 1990's we produced a lot of legal theory work. We did a lot of research, we had conferences in Houston, Texas, mainly, about four or five of them, and we gathered other lawyers and legal experts.

Out of that grew law students, law professors, books. I worked on the International Bill of Gender Rights, the first human – comprehensive human rights statement. There was another one, that was a good statement, but very partial – in the legal sense at least. That document had a certain amount of impact in terms of establishing Transgender people as humans, and not something from another planet; because, basically what it did was it speaking in gender terminology, it basically went through the list of rights that everyone else has or would like to have and just said, “Transgender people are in that realm, too!”

And that encouraged a number of entities...these declarations don't *do* anything, I mean someone has to adopt them to – and there were entities that did that. They looked at this document and said, “Yes, this is a good document.” There are a couple of municipalities. Oddly enough, it's been translated into several languages -- maybe

not oddly, but interestingly enough in Europe there are other translations of it, where it seems to have had more traction in Europe than in the United States. They put it before the United Nations, and of course everything goes to the United Nations, so I don't know where it stands there now, but the - that was probably my biggest effort there. I worked in the military law area, too, quite a bit and counseled with people in the military about their problems and with people in prison. I was in charge of that part of it.

That group disbanded finally, and we just went with the National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Bar Association, and we joined, Transgender people joined that group in about 1993, I believe. And, I had the honor of introducing a resolution to include Transgender people in that group. There'd been some resistance to it, but they took us in, finally.

My colleague and mentor is lawyer named Phyllis Frye¹, who practices out of Houston, TX and is the - the real founding mother of the Transgender Law Conference, and I one of the first - I was the founding director. There were five of us, originally. But that group was very, very active.

Some of the top lawyers in the country that are now in the social justice movement for Lesbians and Gays came out of that group in one way or the another. Shannon Minter², who argued some of the recent big Supreme Court cases, has - she's now, I say she, because I knew her when she was a girl, way back when she was a Cornell student. Shannon is a guy, and Shannon is one of the most brilliant lawyers in the country and has argued these cases in the U.S. Supreme Court. Shannon came to the, some of the law conferences as a law student at Cornell

Things have worked out pretty well for me. I've lost two jobs to the fact that I'm Transgender. And each time, it's a big disappointment when that happens, but each time I've gone on to better things. So, I look back on those experiences now as sort of Godsend; you know, I was kind of in a rut when I lost those jobs. So it kind of got me out of the rut. It sent me off in new directions.

So, I've had; I burned out at the end of the Century. So, about the year 2000, I decided to retire from the activism. I'd lost, I was in the financial hole, and I needed just to go back to work. I had a job in the area where I lived for three years on a grant, and I did that; recovered some of my economic... and then I retired, got Social Security, so I'm in good shape now.

¹Phyllis Randolph Frye is an Associate Judge for the City of Houston Municipal Courts. Frye is the first transgender judge appointed in Texas. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis_Frye

² Shannon Price Minter is an American civil rights attorney and the legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights in San Francisco. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shannon_Minter

But, there were a lot of people like me who put – not just time but money – into these movements. And, it wasn't me so much as some of my colleagues who were practicing law and earning maybe bigger returns from that. They invested heavily in these things, as well as their time and effort, but the movement grew.

The church – I had given up on – I grew up as a Presbyterian, I left the Presbyterian Church at one point, and was away from it for quite a few years, but I came back in the 1980's. And my church, my present church in Cooperstown, New York³ is a More Light Church.

I wrote the More Light resolutions in 1992; and we passed it in 1994. And, I had contacts with Presbyterians for Lesbians and Gays; I went to several More Light national conferences.

As part of the – one of the things that grew out of my PLGC contact was contact with Mitzi Henderson,⁴ who was a staunch ally of this organization and More Light. And, she was well-connected in Chicago with the seminary, she became President of PFLAG – Parents Friends of Lesbians and Gays⁵ – and we were struggling to get them to recognize Transgender people, and there was resistance in the chapter, so we decided to go national, we decided to go to the national organization and not just wrestle with all these PFLAG chapters, individually. And, the Executive Director Sam Rigilis and Mitzi were open to this. And, so I wrote the resolutions and Mitzi introduced the to the board at the PFLAG Annual Meeting that year in Indianapolis, and lo and behold they created a space for Transgender people and that eventually grew into their organizational structure as a division of what they do. And, it survives today.

I managed it for one year; but then the real people arrived: people with children who were Transgender. Or parents, - who or children, who had a Transgender parent – I mean in all sorts of...

So, there're some things I kept in contact with all the way and given up financing people, going to conferences and doing things or even counseling people informally, but I came back last year because I learned that, I started, I became aware of all the problems around the world that Gay and Lesbian people and Transgender people are having.

There are eight-two countries where being Gay or Lesbian is a crime. I met a man named Mark Kiyimba⁶, a Ugandan pastor, in the Unitarian denomination. He is the only pastor in Uganda that has ministered to GLBT people in that country, and his life is literally at risk for it. He has a family; he runs a school in his hometown of

³ First Presbyterian Church of Cooperstown, NY. <http://www.cooperstownpresbyterianchurch.org/>

⁴ Mitzi Henderson, Religious Archives Network. <http://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=93>

⁵ <https://community.pflag.org/>

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Kiyimba

Masaka, Uganda, which is about 2 ½ hours south of Kampala on the shores of Lake Victoria.

It's a fairly big city, actually, and he has eight hundred "poverty children" – this is the way he describes them, these are people who don't have the ordinary means to pay for a school. Apparently in Uganda, you have to pay for the government school something – and if you can't, you're just not in school

So, he has a school for those children and he also has AIDS orphans about forty of them, who actually have the disease, and many of his other peoples are children of AIDS victims. And, Mark was in this country to some extent, to take the heat off of himself, so he wouldn't be there if they decided to arrest him and the other reason was to raise money and educate people about what was happening in Uganda.

And, so anyone interested in this should watch the film by Roger Ross Williams, a documentary that came out in 2012 or 2013; it's called "God Loves Uganda⁷," and it's the story of how American religious conservatives – cult leaders, really – went to Uganda and convinced the Ugandan parliament that they should persecute Gays to the extent of putting them to death, in certain situations.

That law is now in suspense; but the laws that were on the books before that are bad enough. And, Uganda is only one of many countries that have these laws. They're not always enforced uniformly or punitively, but the fact that they're there allows other people to take the law in their own hands, and with impunity punish Gay and Lesbian people without facing the consequences, themselves.

And, so there are people stoned to death occasionally, it hasn't happened in any mass way, but it happened just recently in Sierra Leone. And, if you watch the film, "God Loves Uganda" – you see that anti-Western feeling in some of these countries is conflated with the GLBT issue, so this is a way of saying – they're well aware that GLBT people in the United States are now out, so to speak.

We're out but, the persecution doesn't necessarily go away when you are out.

But to the African inclined to hate Gays or has been taught that, this becomes...they feel like these Gay people in Uganda are imitating Western culture and that it's a Western culture problem. Hence the title "God Loves Uganda," because Uganda is more Christian than this fallen nation, this evil fallen nations America, which has a bad reputation for other reasons perhaps, too - militarily.

And, where the church stands in all of this is...so this is...I did some bookings for this man in New York, and got him dates for speaking for speaking in New York and elsewhere, and I wasn't the only one helping him by any means.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_Loves_Uganda

He stayed in Oswego County, where I live. I'm from the Cooperstown area. He stayed with us a week. He preached in his... the Unitarian Church, and he preached in a Presbyterian Church. He went to a Rotary Club meeting, gave a good presentation about his school.

He went to the SUNY (State University) Pride Conference. They have a Pride Conference. People come from – I think they had 1500 campuses represented out of sixty that have these sexuality and gender offices.

They have students that they're counseling, and they brought them and we had more than 100 people at SUNY Oneonta last October. Mark was the keynote speaker. And it's a cautionary tale for Americans to hear that being Gay and Lesbian in this country that there's something to celebrate; that there's also -- it's a tragic situation around the world and it – we're now looking into – our church has begun to look into the possibility of having refugees or asylum seekers.

So, when you ask me what else is there to be done, I mean we certainly still have our own struggles – what I've learned in my years of activism – dating back to my days with the NAACP, is if you – if you struggle to liberate somebody else – and you see their struggle as yours even though you're not part of it, you'll liberate yourself, eventually.

That's my message. That's what it takes.

You have get behind somebody else, first.

The tragic dynamic of democracy is that it takes often tragic persecution, abuse and oppression in order to build a community of resistance and these organizations within the Presbyterian Church are communities of resistance. And those communities sometimes take generations to build and to have the effect of overthrowing the abuse. And, it and in some cases – hundreds of years.

What has amazed me is how quickly some of these things – and in some ways I give the Internet the credit for this -- the communications that we had to deal with in the 1960's were so cumbersome. I had to write letters to people, I had to type on a manual typewriter. On a correcting Selectric... you know, it literally took months to accomplish what you can do in a day now. So, they're moving more quickly. But also, the prejudice and the abuse moves more quickly.

Warren: We're running a little short on time. If you could just maybe give some closing comments about the significance of this event to you and also to the movement that you are participating in.

Sharon: People in these organizations need each other, they need more than Facebook; they need more than Twitter; they need more than Internet. They need each other. They need to hug each other. They need to see each other. They need to

touch each other, spiritually and worship together and that's why it's so important and energizing to come to these things – and spend the money and the time that it takes.

And, you just have to recharge your batteries and you have to find – you now, they're entitled to a victory lap here. I mean many of these people, I have suffered a little, very, very little compared to – I'm kind of a stealth person because I can go either way. These are committed people – and they're in committed relationships, and I'm basically an ally, is what I am. But, to see them take this victory lap, nothing could have kept me away from here. I just... I wanted to see these people again. I've seen them over the years – so that's important.

It's also important for them to find a new direction, to find, to see where – and also, we have a whole new generation who hasn't grown up with the kinds of abuse and oppression that they have – and hopefully won't experience that.

But, hopefully will take that energy and go in useful ways and find that next group of people: the immigrants, the poor, and figure out where that's what they need to do. That what... they need to find the next group that needs liberation and put their shoulders to that wheel.

You study, I teach the Women's Suffrage Movement, the Women's Rights Movement. I teach classes on this. Susan B. Anthony⁸, Elizabeth Cady Stanton⁹ stepped aside from the abolition of slavery, and they waited until after the Civil War to resume that struggle.

And, Susan B. Anthony is my hero. There was no better person on the face of this planet, as far as I am concerned. But she found ways over a lifetime to keep that movement moving. She died in 1913; she never saw the vote in New York. She saw the day when some women were voting in states like Montana and so on, but...it - so these people are role models; it's good to see the younger...we've got enough younger people here to –

I'm 74 years old. It's also important for me to be able to look back... so I'm here for my own mental health .

I don't get a chance to be Sharon that often.

Thank you very much for sharing...

⁸ Susan Brownell Anthony was an American social reformer and feminist who played a pivotal role in the women's suffrage movement. Born into a Quaker family committed to social equality, she collected anti-slavery petitions at the age of 17. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_B._Anthony

⁹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an American suffragist, social activist, abolitionist, and leading figure of the early women's rights movement. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Cady_Stanton