

## EVER-UNFOLDING IDENTITY

by Ellie Roscher

**W**e live in a society with invisible but forceful rules on how we should express gender, sexuality, religion, and race. Breaking these rules can have serious consequences. If we break the rules about what a girl should look like or what a heterosexual should act like, others may ridicule and ostracize us until we feel as if we no longer belong. A sense of belonging is crucial in high school, a result of widening our circles of friends.

High school is prime time for exploring who God created us to be and how we want to express that in the world. Our sense of who we are changes and grows dynamically grade by grade during high school. The unwritten rules about how to look and how to act often put unnecessary pressure on the identity we are forming. What should be an exciting time of exploring who we are and want to be can become scary, limiting, and hurtful.

### FOR REFLECTION

- What are the unwritten rules that come with each category (gender, sexuality, religion, race)? How do they limit you or free you?
- What other categories beside gender, sexuality, religion and race do you see having strict rules concerning acceptable expression?

Gender is how we choose to express our maleness and femaleness in the world. Colors and toys begin to express our gender from the moment we are born—pink and blue blankets, truck for boys, dolls for girls. These unwritten rules can seem restricting to young people who want to stretch the rules or whose talents take them beyond usual roles.

Brianna grins in a big photo on the front page of the New York Times sports section. A homecoming queen with a wide smile, Brianna is stunning in her tiara and surprising in her white football jersey No. 12. The jersey is her own. She is the place kicker for the winning team at Pinckney Community High School in Michigan. Her classmates call her the Kicking Queen. Brianna's story reports 28 girls play on football teams in Michigan.

Danielle is an excellent athlete and likes to sweat in the weight room at her high school. She recently broke both the benching and the squatting records for girls at her school. "Some people think it is cool, but I can tell other people are uncomfortable with it. My girlfriends won't come with me to the weight room, and not all the guys in there like it." Danielle also likes to fix her hair and wear dresses to dances. From moment to moment, she is expressing her gender and has room to hold this diversity inside herself. But all too often she feels pressure to check one box and follow the gender rules, which may keep her out of the weight room.

Connor grows his hair out in high school and likes to follow fashion. He has a well-trained, high tenor voice and sings in theater productions. He also starts on the varsity football team. As high school goes on, he finds he likes theater more and more and football less and less. But in theater, he does not always feel his outside

friends and family support him. They never actually say it, but he senses that they think his love of things like fashion and singing do not adequately express his male gender. “I never quit football because my dad came to every game. I knew it meant a lot to him, so I did it for him, but he never made a play performance.”

The gender rules that media and marketing enforce seem to be getting more extreme. GI Joe now has bigger muscles, and Barbie is skinnier. Instead of breaking the gender rules, we are exaggerating them, making them harder to attain and the consequences of breaking them more severe. Too many young men and women feel inadequate in the ways they express their gender and put time and money into attaining the ideal that the media portrays. When young people fall short, some will struggle with things like depression, disordered eating, and violence.

Sometimes the media tries to subvert and soften the rules. It’s fun when a film like *Toy Story 3* plays Barbie and Ken in reverse roles. Ken is all about fashion and appearances; Barbie is the leader of the toys.

Danielle expresses her femaleness and Connor expresses his sense of being male in complex, ever-changing ways. If we experience pressure to limit our gender expression and play by the rules about what a man or woman should look like, we may not be honoring the gifts that God has given us.

The sex that we are born with does not need to come with strict rules about how to express your gender in the world. How each of us chooses to express being male or female is a lifelong process that will require more space than the unwritten rules tend to allow.

## FOR REFLECTION

- In your high school, what rules come with being a masculine boy? A feminine girl?
- In your community, do you feel pressure to follow unwritten rules? If you do, give an example or share a story.
- What ridicule or enforcement have you seen used to push people back into the box?
- If there were no consequences, how would you express your gender differently?
- If you were the opposite sex for a day, what do you imagine the advantages and disadvantages to be?

**B**eside gender rules we contend with sexuality in the high school years. As we go through puberty, we begin to see ourselves as sexual people. Though connected, gender and sexuality are not interchangeable concepts. We cannot tell another person's sexual orientation based on how that person looks or what he or she wears.

Jason is a high school boy who is sexually attracted to other boys. He also chooses to break some of the gender rules of being a boy. "It is hard because I get made fun of. I don't know why how I dress is threatening to other people, but that is how I know who my real friends are. Some people like me for me."

His friend Ben is also homosexual but expresses his gender in a more stereotypically male way. "It is funny because everyone assumes I am heterosexual because I know I come off as, you know, macho," he laughs. "I am not dating, but people just assume I like girls because I fit the mold."

Joe gets made fun of for being homosexual even though he is heterosexual. When I asked him about it he said, "I know it is because I play with gender. It is little things like wearing bright colored pants and having a rainbow key ring. But I like girls."

Kristin is starting to recognize a growing sense of sexuality, but she is a little con-

fused with how to classify herself. “I feel closer to girls. You know, like a special connection. I know I am supposed to like guys; I just haven’t found one yet.”

Again, we all need room to form our own identities without pressure to follow the unwritten rules. Jason, Ben, Joe and Kristin all deserve to have room away from criticism to grow into the person God created them to be and to express what that looks like in the world.

## FOR REFLECTION

- Why are people so quick to connect expressions of gender with sexuality?
- How safe is your school for homosexual students?
- What pressure do you feel to get your sexuality all figured out?

## Religious Faith

**W**hat does “a real Catholic” look like and act like? Today Catholic high schools often have some non-Catholic students. They often feel very intimidated going to a Catholic school. These believers alert us that we live in a time when interfaith dialogue is essential. We need to listen to each other and respect the spiritual background of all people—across religions, across Christian denominations, and across Catholics.

When we worship in Catholic school or parish, we worship as one in community. In big suburban congregations or newly clustered city or country parishes, many or most people may be strangers to each other. Among the people we see around us, we don’t know who believes firmly at this moment and who is questioning their faith. Who are these people with whom we exchange a sign of peace and who say amen to receiving the Body of Christ? We gather for worship for the purpose of making friends of strangers and building up oneness among us. My individual experiences may keep me from feeling I belong. High school students have many questions:

“Am I Catholic if I don’t go to church every Sunday?”

“Am I Catholic if I disagree with some of the teachings?”

“I am really angry at God right now because of my parents’ divorce. That means I am not Catholic, right?”

The teen years are an important time to ask big questions and grow into an adult, authentic faith. Our Catholic faith is not about who is in

the club and who is not. In the gospel Jesus never excludes someone because of doubt and lack of clarity. Pulling out weeds may uproot the wheat, he teaches (Matthew 13.29). Many question him and argue with him. Following blindly shows no real, true relationship. God can handle our doubts and our anger.

When students tell theologian Marcus Borg that they don’t believe in God, he says, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” Perhaps we are holding over from childhood an image of God we can no longer square with science or a God who seems to permit too much evil, or a God captive in a box too small to hold inexhaustible mystery.

Faith is not about clarity, following the rules perfectly, or being right. We live in a time when we need to listen to each other’s experience of the divine instead of judging or excluding each other because of differences. People who identify as Catholic can learn from dialogue with people from other faith backgrounds. Our faith calls us to work together for justice in the world.

## FOR REFLECTION

- What big questions are you asking about God, faith, and religion right now?
- How does your faith community help you?

## Race

In our society white is still the norm, and people of color who live more on the margins of our society experience racism. Racism means treating someone differently because of the color of his or her skin. In 1979, the U.S. bishops wrote a document called *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, in which they insist that racism is “a sin, a powerful, prevalent sin in our society.” Our nationality refers to the country where we were born. Our ethnicity refers to how we choose to celebrate our culture and heritage. Our race is how people perceive our skin tone, which can change depending on our context. My light skin tone is common in New York City and unusual in Cairo or Tokyo. People make quick judgments about someone’s skin tone while walking down the school hallway. In reality, our country of origin and our culture and heritage are complex and unique.

Olivia was born in the United States. Her family comes from Ireland and Germany on her mom’s side and Puerto Rico and Africa on her dad’s side. Her dad left her family when she was two, so she has been raised celebrating the Irish and German culture in her family tree. “But people just see me as black,”

she says. “Because my mom is white, people assume I am adopted. When we travel together, even with my United States passport, I am always the one who gets searched while my mom walks right through.” These are little moments that add up daily for Olivia. Because we can see skin color, it is easy to judge. Olivia is a beautiful young woman with a beautiful story. She was created in the image of God.

## FOR REFLECTION

- What is your nationality? Your ethnicity? Your family's story?
- How might people treat you because of your skin tone in a different time period? In a different region of the world?
- Why do we judge based on skin tone? Where do you see racism in your community? How can we work to dismantle the prejudice?

In high school students like to categorize each other in order to make sense of the world. We see someone in the hall and subconsciously categorize the person's gender, sexuality, religion, and race without even realizing it. And with each categorization, we are limiting that person from expressing his or her unique humanity. It is our work to suspend judgment on people long enough to build relationships, so that we do not stuff each other into boxes that are too small to hold our spirits. Hopefully, if the community is healthy, by the end of high school, we are telling other people who we are, and they are listening. And isn't it always the case that when we are able to tell people who we are, the answer is more complex, more dynamic, messier and more colorful?

We are all created in the image of God. We will all be one family in heaven. We can work toward that vision in this time and place as we celebrate high school as a time to explore our ever-changing identity in terms of our gender, sexuality, religion, and race.

## FOR REFLECTION

- How do you hope to answer the identity question on the date you graduate? Describe the person you hope to become.