

ReGenesis 3: The Beauty in Between and Beyond: Genesis and LGBTQ+
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1

“Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.” This line, attributed to Confucius, proposes that beauty is not *somewhere*, present only on extraordinary days and in extraordinary places. Instead, beauty is *everywhere*, present even on ordinary days and in ordinary places. The work in life is to see the glory that is always nearby, but often neglected. Beauty, despite another well-known saying, is not merely in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is everywhere, always ready to be beheld. It’s that pesky eye, however, that remains blind to so much of it.

This is especially true when it comes to those we may know, and love, in the LGBTQ+ community, including our own family members. Theirs is a beauty wondrous to behold. Yet, often, their splendor is, at best, missed, and, at worst, denied, because of the way many have been culturally and religiously conditioned to “see” beauty.

2

The timeline of art history beats with this truth. As art moved from Italian Renaissance, to Baroque, to Rococo, to Neoclassicism, to Romanticism and through multiple additional movements, the notion of what was “beautiful” changed again and again.

For example, Impressionism, a now beloved art style, was once outcast. Breaking from Realism, Impressionist painters like Monet rejected realistic representations to use visible brushstrokes, vivid colors, and compositions designed to capture the emotions of light and movement. Each period of history has featured some who said, “*That’s beautiful*” but “*That’s not*”—until the next movement arrived and the beauty once admonished now became admired. [source: <https://mymodernmet.com/important-art-movements/>]

3

Something similar is experienced when it comes to human beauty as it is expressed in terms of gender and sexuality. For many, a particular perspective, one that limits human beauty and goodness to rigid categories, is rooted in a particular way of reading the creation account in Genesis 1. This ancient record is written in a way that *appears* to emphasize what we might call “binary.”

This word came up recently when Montana legislators moved to make it nearly impossible for transgender individuals to change the sex or gender indication on their birth certificates. Testifying in favor of this restriction, one person remarked “The word sex actually *means* something. It's *binary*, either male or female ...” [source: <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/21/1124370327/montana-state-courts-are-blocking-2-attempts-to-restrict-transgender-peoples-rig>] Either *this* or *that*, nothing in between or beyond. And, this binary way of thinking about ourselves and our world seems to appear in Genesis 1. Repeatedly, the artistry of creation is painted in seemingly fixed and firm categories that stand opposite to each other:

- Heavens v. Earth (1)
- Light v. Darkness/ Day v. Night (4-5)
- Dry Land v. Seas (9-10)
- Sun v. Moon & Stars (14-16)
- Sea creatures v. Birds (20-21)
- Male v. Female (27).

4

These feel like binary categories. They appear to be fixed and firm, distinct from each other. The creation account may leave us wondering: is beauty only to be found in the binary? This literalistic way of reading the poetry of Genesis 1 might lead us to assume “*That* is beautiful!”--land/ sea, sun/ stars, fish/ birds, male/ female. “But not *that*!”--that is, anything that seems to be outside these fixed and firm categories. This is predominantly true for many when it comes to that last category: male/ female.

5

Based on the apparent binary nature of the Genesis creation account, some have made assumptions about goodness and beauty when it comes to human gender, sexuality and identity. The hunch is that gender identities, gender expressions, and sexuality that fall outside those clear categories are anything but good and beautiful.

There can be no blending of these divisions. There's only male and female. What's male is always male. What's female is always female. Most importantly, when it comes to sexuality, it may only exist as an experience between the two in the opposing categories--males with females. Anything else is not beautiful. And not good.

6

Of course, this binary way of considering gender and sex ignores something historical. Cultures, races and classes often differ in how they view masculinity or femininity. And even within a culture, such as the culture of the United States, views of “true” masculinity or femininity change over time.

6

This binary way of considering gender and sex also ignores something scientific. According to the simple scenario, the presence or absence of a Y chromosome is what counts: with it, you are male, and without it, you are female. But doctors have long known that some straddle the boundary—their sex chromosomes say one thing, but their ovaries or testes say another. Parents of children with these kinds of conditions—known as intersex conditions--often face difficult decisions about whether to bring up their child as a boy or a girl. [sources: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/sex-redefined-the-idea-of-2-sexes-is-overly-simplistic1/> and Megan DeFranza *Sex Difference in Christian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2015)]

7

But this binary way of thinking also ignores something vital in the biblical creation account itself: the beauty of all that exists in between and even beyond these apparent binaries. Reflected in this ancient creation account, and lived by each of us everyday in this same creation, is the existence of countless realities that lie in between these distinctions and even beyond them. There is much good and glory in them as well.

8

We recognize this, almost intuitively, when it comes to every category in Genesis 1 *except* gender and sexuality. Consider, for example, the categories of sea creatures and birds. God fills the seas with a distinct subset of creatures. And he fills the air with a different subset. Both are glorious--fish and birds.

Still, in between these binaries exist species that defy fixed categorization. Consider the penguin. Though they are birds, penguins have flippers instead of wings. Though they are birds, they cannot fly--they waddle. Though they are birds--they are expert swimmers. Though they are birds, their coloring is as beneficial for camouflage in the water as out of the water. [source: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/penguin>]

Just what is this--a bird or a fish? Whatever it is, it's beautiful! A binary world has no room for a creature like the penguin. But that world exists only in the limited minds of some. The real world, the world God created, makes room for such. There is beauty in between and beyond.

9

Consider, also, the categories of day and night. God creates light and darkness. Each has a beauty all its own. Each is vital to the order God has brought to creation. Each can be equally enjoyed.

Still, in between these binaries exist spaces that defy fixed categorization, like dusk and dawn. Is dusk day or night? Is dawn day or night? Yes! These exquisite moments seem to live in between or beyond any category.

Dusk and dawn are fundamental experiences for almost all humans. For most of us, either dusk or dawn is, in fact, one of our favorite times of the day (or, is that night?). In these liminal spaces, with their vibrant colors and muted sounds, many of us come alive, inhale peace, and exhale worries, fears and anxieties. The rising or setting sun resets us in a way nothing else does. God, I suppose, could have designed this to work differently, the way our lights work in our workplaces, schools and homes. Flip the switch, and it's day. Flip the switch and it's night. Nothing in between. But God did not make that world.

A binary world has no room for dusk and dawn. But that world exists only in the limited minds of some. The real world, the world God created, makes room for such. There is beauty in between and beyond.

10

In addition, consider the fixed categories of sea and land. Each is necessary. Each may be prized.

Still, in between them are spaces equally as vital. We might consider Arctic and Antarctic sea ice. What is it? Is it sea? Is it land? It's both and neither.

Arctic and Antarctic sea ice covers about 7% of the Earth's surface and about 12% of the world's oceans. Sea ice can be attached (or frozen) to the shoreline (fast ice) or free to move with currents and winds (drift ice). Sea ice provides an ecosystem for polar species, particularly the polar bear. The ice reflects sunlight back into space, preventing heat from being absorbed by the earth. Decreases in this ice lead to rising ocean levels as well as increasingly extreme weather patterns. Melting permafrost in the Arctic leads to the releasing of carbon dioxide and methane. [source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_ice]

A binary world has no place for something like sea ice. Yet, its rapid disappearance, and the consequences we are experiencing as a result, testify to why God created a world where such things not only exist, but are necessary. It's part of the beauty in between and beyond.

11

Consider also the existence of wetlands--not quite land and not quite sea. Something of both.

Wetlands store carbon and thus moderate global climate conditions. We use a wealth of products from wetlands, including fish and shellfish, blueberries, cranberries, timber and wild rice. Some medicines are derived from wetland soils and plants. Flounder, sea trout, spot, croaker and striped bass are among the fish that depend on coastal wetlands. Shrimp, oysters, clams, and blue and Dungeness crabs need these wetlands.

For wood ducks, muskrat, cattails and swamp rose, inland wetlands are the only places they can live. For striped bass, peregrine falcon, otter, black bear, raccoon and deer, wetlands provide important food, water or shelter.

Wetlands function as natural sponges that trap and slowly release surface water, rain, snowmelt, groundwater and flood waters. Trees, root mats and other wetland vegetation slow the speed of flood waters and distribute them over the floodplain. This lowers flood heights and reduces erosion. [source: epa.gov]

A world in which beauty only comes in binaries has no room for wetlands. But that world exists only in the limited minds of some. The real world, the world God created, makes room for such. There is beauty in between and beyond.

12

This reality has led some to propose that what we actually find in Genesis 1 are a series of something called "merisms." For example, describing God as the "alpha/ beginning" and "omega/ end" is a merism. The saying doesn't mean that God is only the "alpha" or only the "omega." It means he is everything in between alpha and omega. Something similar may be true for the categories of Genesis 1.

The creation account of Genesis 1 can be compared to a series of merisms. The "good" which God calls his creation applies not only to the binaries of day/ night, sea/ land, sun/ moon and fish/ birds but to all that lies in between them (and even beyond them): dawn and dusk, wetlands and marshland, and certain species and atmospheric and celestial phenomenon that defy clear categorization. Everything--all of this--has beauty.

13

So, if this is true for all the rest of the creation categories, must it not also be true with the last creation category: male and female? Why would all of this be true for everything in this ancient record *except* for humanity? What's true of the rest of this remarkable creation is also true for the human creation. Beauty exists not only with respect to gender, identity and sexuality contained in the binaries of male and

female, but also with respect to that which lies in between and beyond. Humanity itself has dusks and dawns, not just days and nights. Humanity itself possesses sea ice and wetlands, not merely lands and seas.

14

And this truth opens up new ways for us to think about a host of issues related to humanity, such as:

- Gender identity
- Gender expression
- Assigned sex
- Gender roles
- Sexual orientation

No longer must we assume we are confined solely to unmoveable categories of male and female. We may now see the beauty between and beyond.

15

Auten Hartke, in his book about transgender Christians, called *Transforming*, writes this: "These binaries aren't meant to speak to all of reality--they invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond." (51) Just as land and sea or day and night are merisms, calling us to notice and not neglect the beauty between and beyond, so "male" and "female" are merisms, calling us to notice and not neglect the beauty between and beyond.

16

Thus, gratefully, we may consider not only cisgender as good and beautiful. But splendor and glory can be seen in a host of other human experiences, including these:

- Gay
- Bisexual
- Lesbian
- Non binary
- Gender nonconforming
- Pan gender
- Transgender

A binary world has no place for any person in this list, or others like them. But that world exists only in the limited minds of some. The real world, the world God created, not only has space for them. It celebrates them. It recognizes their splendor and grandeur.

17

Staci Frenes is a songwriter, speaker and author. Her latest book shares the story of her parenting her daughter who came out as lesbian. To capture the experience, she chose the title *Love Makes Room*. As a parent of an LGBTQ+ child, she had to learn, and help others to learn, that love makes room--especially for people like her daughter.

18

This is what Genesis 1 is all about. Genesis 1 is about a God who, in love, makes room, not only for places, creatures and people that feel like they fit completely and securely into easily recognized boxes, but also for those that don't. The world that exists in the minds of some does not make room. But the real world, the world created and sustained by love, does.

19

And since God's created world makes such room, we do as well. Our nations with their laws and cultures must make room. Our churches with their values and practices must make room. Our homes with their traditions and ways must make room. And our hearts, too, must make room.

And we not only make room, we protect and preserve. When it comes to the rest of creation it's these inbetween and beyond spaces and species that are most at risk. We're losing wetlands and sea ice. We're losing polar species. Much work is needed to preserve them. The same is true when it comes to humanity. Those in between and beyond are most at risk and deserve our advocacy and protection.

20

The world God created is a world where the LGBTQ+ community is invited to flourish. Alexa, as she completes her education at Stanford, prepares to enter the workplace, and plans a wedding with her beloved Shravya. Annie, as she leads calls to worship on Sundays at church, serves on the mayor's diversity committee in her city, and blesses the lives of her clients in her business. Andrew and Jacob, as they pursue degrees in music performance and careers on professional stages. Parents like Gil and Gail, John and Gayla, Kendra and I, as we seek to nurture homes that truly celebrate the beauty in between and beyond.

20

The world God created is a world where all of us find a space, for in our own ways, there are parts of all of us that dwell in between and beyond. Who of us fits neatly into any box or category? For virtually all of us, there are parts of us that are wetlands or marsh. There are selves within us that are penguins or platypus. Thank God for a world that even makes room even for people like us.

21

In 2020, an ad campaign was designed for Amtrak. It was called “The Beauty in Between.” Three posters formed the core of the campaign.

The first showed the view outside the window of the train “Sunset Limited.” In view was a massive lake bordered by large mountains. The text said, “The best sightseeing happens before you arrive. You’ve read the blogs. You’ve seen the Instagrams. But nothing can prepare you for the destinations that aren’t printed on your ticket.”

The second poster revealed a view from the window of the train “California Zephyr.” We see rolling and golden fields, and an old power line and power pole. The text said, “There’s no such thing as a flyover state. Nebraska? Boring? Maybe from 30,000 feet. But all it takes is one look out a train window to realize what you’ve been missing.”

The final poster displayed the view from the passenger window of “Empire Builder.” The window fills with a field, trees and a mountain. The text says, “Nowhere, sweet nowhere. No notifications, no deadlines and no people. It’s time to discover why ‘the middle of nowhere’ isn’t a problem, it’s a selling point.” [source: <https://www.oneclub.org/awards/youngones/-award/35980/the-beauty-in-between>]

The creators of this campaign wanted us to know that the beauty in the journey is found in all those unexpected and remarkable places in between.

And the Creator of this cosmos wants us to know that the beauty in the journey is found in all those unexpected and remarkable places in between--and beyond.