

4.3 Lisa Salazar Autobiographical Statement

I am an immigrant, first to the United States, and later to Canada. I am Hispanic, Latina, white-skinned, a citizen of Colombia by birth, a citizen of Canada by choice. I am a transgender woman and a lesbian. I chose to become a Canadian citizen—I had no choice over any of the things that make up my core identity.

Before I talk about my life experience, I must first explain why I begin with this list of identifiers; some of which are visible; others are not. I see the intersection of all these things, both seen and unseen as the context of my life experience.

There is another significant identifier that is not on the list above, but I am reluctant to include it without a caveat or explanation, as discussed in 4.1 Personal/Professional Integration; I no longer identify as a Christian. I prefer to identify simply as a follower of Christ.

For the first 56 years of my life, I had no problem Identifying as a “Bible-believing, Evangelical—and perhaps fundamentalist—Christian. But in May 2006 things began to shift when the new pastor at our church held up his Bible and said, “A lot of people claim this book has all the answers we need to live. I’m not one of those people; I can’t make that claim because there is a lot of ambiguity and contradiction, there is a lot of mystery in this book. I have to approach the Bible with humility and it’s really dangerous for me to take a phrase or verse out of context to develop a theology or doctrine. It’s not black and white because somebody else could look at that passage and get a different insight and a different interpretation. We need to be humble when we read this book.”

In all my years in church I had never heard a preacher be so candid. I remember sitting in the pew wondering, “Do I do that? Do I take things out of context?” The answer was yes, of course I did. The fact was that for thirty years, since coming to faith in Christ in my early 20’s—during the Jesus People Movement of the early 70s—I’d been struggling with this internal chaos for which I had no terminology or vocabulary. The word transgender was not available to me in those days; it did not come into use until almost 1990.

Through all those years I had spiritualized my struggle. I had come to Christ sincerely believing and wanting that beautiful invitation in Matthew 12: “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” to come true. I was wanting and expecting a healing. I wanted to be normal. I didn’t want to be different. I didn’t want this thing I felt inside to continue.

I did research to try to figure out why I felt the way I did. There were no stories in the media about people with whom I could identify, I couldn’t say, “They sound like me!” The only word I could research was transvestism and what I learned terrified me. The medical dictionary said a transvestite was someone who engaged in deviant sexual behaviour. Transvestism was considered a psychological

disorder and the recommended treatment could include electroshock, lobotomy, castration, and therapy; or being institutionalized. This is what I was reading in the 60's as a teen-ager.

So, when I came to faith in Christ, I didn't want this to be true. Was I a pervert? No. I wasn't. But in spiritualizing my condition, I also demonized it. I became a very fundamentalist person with respect to sexuality. Things needed to be black and white and I became a very literal reader of Scripture.

The phrase I had taken out of context all those years was from Matthew 19, which most bibles title as "Teaching about divorce." The Pharisees had come to test Jesus on his views on divorce and he proceeds to quote from Genesis, "God created them male and female."

I had taken those six words out of context and I used that phrase as kind of a "sledge-hammer" whenever those feelings of chaos would come. "Get behind me Satan! God created us male and female! Be gone, leave me alone." But this was a persistent attack; something that I always struggled with from my earliest memories [as a child]. I may not have framed it the way that I just did, but that was the truth—the reality—that I felt that my body was all wrong; or that there was something wrong with my brain. But then again, as a child and as a teenager, I could I begin to explain that to somebody? How could I even ask and intelligent question to get an intelligent answer?

As I sat in the pew that Sunday, I thought to myself: "I need to go back to the Bible and see where that phrase is and read it in context." It appears in Genesis and Matthew 19. When I read it in context, I began to ask a lot of questions, but what my attention focused on was not so much what Jesus said about divorce and marriage. What I found interesting about Matthew 19 is how Jesus ends the conversation [about divorce] with a parenthetical statement. He brackets what he says about eunuchs with two very interesting statements, or caveats. I found that bracketing process really interesting, but I was also puzzled why he brought up the topic of "eunuchs" when the discussion was about marriage, divorce and fidelity?

Why tell the disciples, "Not everyone will be able to accept this; only those to whom this teaching is given;" then he says "Some people are born eunuchs from their mother's womb, others are made eunuchs by men, and some choose to become eunuchs for the kingdom of God. If you can accept this, receive it."

How odd, I thought, to talk about eunuchs when the discussion with the Pharisees had to do with marriage and fidelity. And what did Jesus mean about the inability for some to understand?

The commentaries reduce this whole thing to simply a discussion about "celibacy." That notion that not everybody gets married; some people are celibate. I believe that explanation leaves money on the table, there is more to it.

Interestingly, however, this passage in Matthew 19 began to unlock the impasse that I had with what doctors had told me in 1999 at Vancouver General Hospital gender clinic.

At the end of the six months assessment, the doctors said, "We can help you. This is not something that is going to go away; this is what you are; you are a transgender person, a transsexual—we can help you transition." (This would be a process that would include social transition, which meant living as a female; transitioning medically by taking hormones to feminize my body, and finally, surgical transition.)

I remember protesting to the doctor who read me the team's diagnosis and proposed care plan, "There's no way. I just want this to go away. I came here hoping you had a therapy, a cure, a pill—something that would numb this part of my brain and allow me to continue as a husband, as a dad, as a son, as a brother" ...I didn't want *that kind* of change. The big reason why I could accept their offer was because of my literal "Biblical" understanding of human sexuality; that there was a binary and you either had to be in box A or box B. I had relegated what the doctors had told me to the "wisdom of man," and it was contrary to the counsel of God's word. I could not move forward.

Going back to the passage in Matthew, for the first time I began to see that what Jesus was saying about eunuchs sort of resonated with, and agreed with what the doctors had told me in explaining to me what it meant to be transgender—that it's a biological issue, a medical issue—it was not something that I chose for myself, it was who I was.

For all of my adult life I felt disqualified, fearing I was a pervert, somehow broken and unequal, and unacceptable to God. I had always felt a huge amount of guilt and shame; I felt defeated as a Christian. But you wouldn't have known because I learned how to look really spiritual, sound really spiritual and to appear absolutely well-adjusted. But inside I had this raging chaos in me. It wasn't until I saw how beautifully Scripture opened up to me and allowed me to see that the eunuch was a good representation of all of us who are sexually "other," we who are different in some way because we don't fit the norm—we don't fit in a box but God does not reject us.

I am grateful that today we have a much greater understanding of the medical and the biological processes of human sexuality—we have a much broader understanding; that it isn't just male and female. I believe that is what that interjection made by Jesus in Matthew 19 really says. Significantly, people always go back to Genesis and say, "Well, in Genesis it's clear that we were created male and female." But if we believe that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, then we have Jesus saying something in Matthew 19 that is equally profound, and that is "God, in the beginning created them male and female, but it doesn't always work that way...some people are born neither male or female." That's what Matthew 19 says in that short statement.

Moreover, it says that even if someone's sexuality—biological, anatomical body is altered somehow by man, that it doesn't disqualify them. Indeed, some people choose to do this for the kingdom of God! And I don't hear any judgment at all in Jesus' words—in what he said about eunuchs.

He doesn't say, "Stay away from these people; these people are dangerous—they will attack your daughters." He doesn't say they can't be involved in leadership—he doesn't say any of those things.

These are the insights that gave me the freedom, in a sense, the permission to go back to the doctors in 2007 and say, "I need help because I'm thinking about death all the time. I'm not in a good place." And just maybe, what the doctors were offering me was the answer to my prayer, despite my very specific expectation of what the answer to prayer should look like—that one day I would wake up and be completely happy in my body and never question anything about my sexuality and I would be a "normal" male—a "cisgender" male— with a happy congruence between my brain and my body.

But the way God answered my prayer was by helping me see that I lived in a time and in a place where now there were answers, where now there were things that I could do that would improve the quality of my life and that I could get on with my life and celebrate the person that I was [am].

But I return to the identifiers I listed at the beginning of this essay. These are lenses through which I'm able to see and describe my life retrospectively; it is the only way my life makes sense and the help me see the bigger picture. Through these lenses, too, I see the irony of how the things none of us get to choose for ourselves, are the things which have been used throughout history—including today—to justify everything from vilification, discrimination, persecution, to annihilation and erasure.

They help me see the injustice of how any one of these unchosen things can become a liability when a group needs someone to blame for their woes; or needs a convenient scapegoat.

These lenses also help me appreciate the role privilege plays in my life. For example, I see transgender women get harassed or looked at derisively just because they have not been able to afford facial hair removal as I have. Another example of privilege is the fact I have the love and support of my family, especially from my three adult sons. (More than 50% of families reject their transgender member.)

In the context of this Spiritual Care conversation, the negative experiences of transgender persons have driven me to invest myself in pastoral and spiritual care.

By the time I decided to transition, I was already 56 years old, and never in my wildest dreams, did I ever think I would be training to be a chaplain less than ten years later. From my earliest memories as a child, I had always been incredibly self-conscious. I was also afraid of rejection. My coming out letter, which I penned in October of 2007 began like this:

"...I'll begin by telling you that I'm not a big risk taker, for fear of my worst fears becoming a reality. I have feared rejection, ridicule, humiliation, losing friends, being the object of mockery, not blending in, being different, hurting or embarrassing loved ones, and as a self-employed person, I have feared losing clients and financial ruin, which would ultimately impact my family more than me.

“...As I said, I’m not a big risk taker. But I need to take the risk of sharing something about myself with you — secrecy is no longer an option, and I have come to realize that disclosing to you is the only way our relationship can continue if it is to have integrity.”

This self-consciousness is what characterized my life before transition. Was I self-aware? Probably not in the sense of how I understand the two concepts today. What is the difference between self-consciousness and self-awareness? Isn’t consciousness a synonym for awareness? While the two words might be used interchangeably in some cases, their meanings change as soon as we place “self” in front of each word. Being self-conscious is not the same as being self-aware.

CPE helped me see self-consciousness was looking inward and making everything about me. In other words, a self-conscious person is self-absorbed; and that is what it was before I came out.

Retrospectively speaking, I can see now how my self-awareness was growing as I reflected on my life, with all its struggles and fears, and the impact my decisions would have on others, especially my family. I wanted to live authentically, but not selfishly. Transitioning was like an emotional intelligence pressure cooker.

However, self-awareness in itself is not a process as much as it is a destination or state of being. It helps me to understand the two concepts as two separate, yet related mental processes generated in two different parts of the brain. Self-consciousness is an emotional reaction generated in the limbic system; self-awareness is a higher function of the rational brain, where we can think about and process those emotions. Emotions affect the way we perceive, experience and or respond to an external situation or event. Emotional intelligence gives us the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways. to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict. It can also help you to connect with your feelings, turn intention into action, and make informed decisions about what matters most to you.¹

Self-awareness was not a concept I thought about until I began CPE. However, CPE’s emphasis on the term helped me to appreciate my how my self-consciousness had acted as the catalyst for developing my self-awareness.

This theoretical framework has helped me make sense of my struggles, it’s true. As a spiritual care practitioner, the framework has also helped me determine the type and level of care and intervention appropriate, and to formulate therapeutic directions.

A personal experience illustrates how my self-awareness was developing unawares. In the Spring of 2008, months before I began to present as female on a full-time basis, my doctor was

¹ Jeanne Segal; Jaelline Janice Jaffe; 2008; The language of emotional intelligence: the five essential tools for building powerful and effective relationships; McGraw-Hill, New York, page 32, 34

concerned for me because I did not have any contact with other transgender persons. He thought it would help me gain the confidence I needed to step out into the world as a woman. He encouraged me to attend a support group meeting at Three Bridges Clinic. I finally mustered the courage to go. I wish I could say it was a positive experience; it was not. I sat in a room with thirty other persons and watched and listened as one by one we introduced ourselves and briefly share why they had come.

My self-consciousness and anxiety were off the chart, but as I looked around, all I could think was how lucky I was in comparison to most of the other transgender persons in the room. There were persons of color, newcomers to Canada, some sex for survival workers—young and old—with heart-wrenching stories of rejection, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and other self-harming and destructive behaviors.

We were a third of the way into the introductions, and the person to my right was next. She had been living in the West End for about six months. She spoke with a sadness that broke my heart. Instinctively, I wanted to put my arm around her and hold her, but I was paralyzed. She shared that at Christmas time she had gone to her parent's home as herself and how her dad, a deacon, and her mother, a member of the choir and very involved in the church, had told her she was no longer their son and kicked her out of the house. Her parents accused her of being deceived by Satan and possessed by a demon. They told her to leave and never come back because she was dead to them.

Two weeks later, she learned, the parents had invited friends to the church for a funeral service, complete with an empty casket.

The reaction in the room was immediate, and I heard all kinds of angry sentiments expressed. "Fucking Christians!" "God damned hypocrites!" "Biggots!"

I wilted in self-consciousness as I sat next to her as she sobbed. I wanted to hold her but was held back by all the vitriol and anger in the room. I wanted to pound the table and declare: "What they did was wrong, but not all Christians are like that. I'm a Christian, and I'm here!" But I was too self-conscious. Then it was my turn to introduce myself; all I could muster up was the courage to say "I go by the name Lisa and this is my first visit. I live in Vancouver." I would have preferred to run out of the room to cry in shame.

But why was I ashamed? I realized it was because I had put myself first by becoming defensive. How I regret that I didn't put my arm around that young woman sitting next to me and offered her words of comfort and encouragement.

The meeting was my first support group experience as a transgender person, and it forced me to recognize the extent of my privileges. I saw that my life was not anywhere as painful, or difficult, as the lives of those who gathered that night at Three Bridges.

At my next appointment with my doctor, he asked if I had attended the support group. I told him how upsetting it had been for me and how instead of helping me feel better about myself, I now carried a burden for everyone else in that room. I told him how heart-broken I felt as I drove home. I wondered what I could do to help them?

I can see how that experience contributed to my desire to be a chaplain to the transgender community and their families. However, I was not conscious of that desire; perhaps it was planted in my heart that night, but it hadn't moved up to my brain yet!

My desire for doing CPE emerged this way:

Three years after I began to live as Lisa, a process referred to as social transition, I self-published a book about my life. It is a linear biographical story.

When I published the book, I had not considered my story would result in getting letters and emails from total strangers. People were opened up to me and told me their secrets. They said they felt safe with me and that my story had helped them sort out their own lives. Parents wrote to say my book helped them love and support their transgender children.

To others, it gave them the courage to come out to family and friends. I also received many letters from men and women for whom coming out and transitioning was not in the cards, yet they needed validation and understanding. From Texas, a thirty-one-year-old Southern Baptist pastor leading a church plant wanted to correspond with me because he felt safe with me; he shared about his struggles with gender identity. However, transitioning was not an option for him because he would lose everything—his marriage, his career, and his reputation.

Another pastor wrote to tell me the book had helped him love his “new” teen daughter. It had given him the courage to put her above his career as the pastor of a megachurch in Northern California. He knew that as soon as his church learned about his daughter, he would likely get fired. He was hoping God would open the hearts and minds of the congregation in the same way my story had opened his heart.

I felt honored but humbled by all the unsolicited connections that resulted from the book. I felt very inadequate, and it would sometimes take me hours to compose a respectful and appropriate response. I was doing spiritual care but felt completely out of my depth.

Then, one year after publishing the book, I received an email from a young man who said he learned I resided in Vancouver. He was ecstatic because he lived in Burnaby. He was in a rush to buy my book and wondered if it was available for sale in Vancouver. He wanted to come out to his best friend, who lived in Montreal and had completed a Master of Divinity degree and was coming that weekend. Together, they were going to Vancouver Island the following week, where his very fundamentalist parents lived; he was also planning to come out to them.

My book was only available for sale on Amazon, but I always had a small inventory at home. Fortunately, it turned we lived less than two kilometers apart. He came that Saturday morning to pick up the book, but stayed for three hours. He was a nervous wreck, self-conscious and very embarrassed. I understood those feeling well. I also appreciated how he had been coping with the stress. While he had started to grow his wavy hair longer, below the collar, he sported a neatly trimmed whiskered face, his way of deflecting suspicion.

Using my new CPE lens, I can see how I ministered to him as I engaged in active listening and offered encouragement, validation, and affirmation that afternoon. Despite the thirty-year difference in our ages, he felt safe with me, and over the next few months after coming out to his family, friends, and at work at IBM, he saw me as a life coach and a spiritual mentor. But I was just following my heart. My reward was that I had a ring-side seat as he transitioned from “him” to “her.” It made me so happy to see her emerge and blossom.

I tell her story because God used this person to point me towards CPE. It happened this way:

One Saturday morning in late March of 2013, Megan called. Her coming out to her best friend had gone well, but her mother had not accepted her. Her father was a different story, though it took him a while to accept the news, he was now fully affirming and supportive. By then, Megan was almost a year into her transition. That Saturday, she invited me to lunch.

On the way to the restaurant, she asked how my job search was going. I was very depressed about not finding a job after sending out close to two-hundred resumes; this was the wrong question to ask. (She knew I was unemployed at the time.) My free-lance graphic design business had collapsed three years into my transition. Clients had stopped calling, and I was doing everything possible to find work. I had even applied for junior and middle-level positions, though I was a senior designer with close to 35 years of experience.

I told Megan I didn’t want to talk about work because I was too upset and depressed about my lack of employment. She apologized.

There was awkward silence for a few minutes as we drove to the restaurant. Then she said, “Can I ask you a question?” Sure, I replied. She continued, “If money wasn’t an object, what job description would you like to have?”

“That’s a really good question.” I remarked, “Let me think.” I continued, “If money wasn’t an object, I would offer my services to non-profits and charities who need help with their branding and marketing. I love to do graphic design, and I would do it for free. But I know that’s not the question you are asking... let me think.”

As I thought out loud, I muttered a few things, and then I announced: “I’d like to be a chaplain to the transgender community!”

Even as the words were coming out of my mouth, I surprised myself and wished I hadn't said them. It seemed so presumptuous and far-fetched. I wanted to take the words back.

Megan's response was immediate. "Oh, my God, Lisa. Yes! That is what you are! That's what you have been to me."

"No!" I protested. "I don't know from where that idea came. I can't call myself a chaplain! I don't even know what it takes to be a chaplain."

Megan responded, "Why don't you Google it?" I mocked, "Yeah, right. Google what? 'chaplaincy training Vancouver?'"

"Yes, try that." She said.

We changed the subject and had a delightful lunch; three hours later, Megan dropped me off at home. As I got out of the car, she said, "Don't forget to Google!"

That is how I discovered CPE training at VGH, which led to a Master's Degree from Vancouver School of Theology.

When I decided to accept the care plan proposed by the doctors in 2006, I expected my life to unfold quietly and without fanfare. I hoped to fade into the woodwork, live a very private life and not draw any attention to myself. I imagined I would continue working as a graphic designer for the rest of my life. That is not what has happened. I became unemployed, my marriage came to an end, and with the exception of a couple of close friends, all other relationships—whether personal or professional—went cold.

Today, I not only earn my living as a Spiritual Care Practitioner, every single person with who I interact, socialize or advocate with have only known me as Lisa. To say that I am living a second life is not an exaggeration. I have had to let go of certain dreams and realities in order to exist. This sense of loss and the re-imagining that has made it possible for me to continue is at the core of my ability to come along side others experiencing loss and who are trying to make sense of their lives.

I count it a privilege to journey alongside folks who feel safe with me and trust me enough to let me walk next to them.