



# The Unity-UU Common Read 2025

## *Authentic Selves: Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families*

### Reading Guide

#### About the Book

Groundbreaking in its depictions of joy and community, *Authentic Selves* celebrates trans and nonbinary people and their families in stunning photographs and their own words. Foreword by transgender activist Jazz Jennings and her mom and fellow activist, Jeanette Jennings.

So often trans and nonbinary people's stories are told only through the lens of their struggles and challenges, including their political battles for legal rights, but trans and nonbinary people live rich and fulfilling lives full of joy and community too. *Authentic Selves: Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families* is a sweeping compilation of life stories and portraits of trans and nonbinary people, as well as their partners, parents, children, siblings, and chosen family members.

The compelling stories in *Authentic Selves* provide a glimpse into the real lives, both the challenges and the triumphs, of these remarkable people and their families—people like Senator Sarah McBride, disability justice advocate Parker Glick, drag entertainer TAYLOR ALXNDR, September 11th first responder Jozeppi Angelo Morelli, model Lana Patel, youth activist Elliott Bertrand, and so many others—all of whom are working to create a more just, diverse, and compassionate world. [InSpirit UUA Bookstore]

Family Diversity Project Authentic Selves exhibit: <https://www.familydiversityprojects.org/exhibits>

#### Introduction

This Common Read guide will explore three themes of *Authentic Selves*: what it means to tell your story, the importance of families (both families of origin and chosen families), and what authenticity means.

It seems that every time you turn on the news, it's filled with stories about transgender and nonbinary people. And most of those stories center the views of people who are cissexual—that is, who are not trans or nonbinary—and who have no close relationships with transgender or nonbinary people. And yet there are about 1.6 million transgender and nonbinary people in the United States. Here are some other facts about gender-expansive people, based on research from the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law.

- Over 1.6 million people identify as transgender in the United States. That's about 0.6% of the total population.
- Of US adults, 0.5% (about 1.3 million) identify as transgender. Among youth ages 13 to 17, 1.4% (about 300,000) identify as transgender.
- Of the 1.3 million adults who identify as transgender, 38.5% (515,200) are transgender women, 35.9% (480,000) are transgender men, and 25.6% (341,800) are gender nonconforming.
- Transgender people are younger on average than the overall US population. Youth ages 13 to 17 are almost five times more likely to identify as transgender than are adults ages 65 or older.

- The racial/ethnic distribution of youth and adults who identify as transgender appears generally like the US population, though research has found that transgender youth and adults are less likely to report being White than is the population as a whole.

Those telling the stories of transgender people often try to frame their lives as out of the ordinary. It is true that each story of transformation and change is extraordinary, but each is also simply the story of a person living their life, sharing radical love, and expanding our understanding of the vast diversity of humankind. This year's Common Read invites the reader and study groups to learn about transgender people and their lives from thirty-five people who fall somewhere on the spectrum of that gender diversity, and from their families.

The word *transgender* comes from the prefix *trans*, which means “through” or “across,” and *gender*, which is the fact or condition of belonging to or identifying as having a connection to specific cultural ideas of what it means to be male or female. There have always been some who transcended those constructed ideas of what men are or what women can do, and there have always been some who were assigned a male or female role but lived authentic lives outside of that label. Even though the media frames hormone therapy and gender affirmation surgery as central to transgender experiences, people can be transgender without ever seeking medical intervention.

In truth, even though the root “trans” may seem to imply movement from one place to another, people who come out in their authentic identity are affirming and revealing to the world who they have always been. Sarah McBride, who shares her story in the book, said in a recent interview, “I’ve always been Sarah. My gender identity has always existed. I’ve always been a woman. Gay people aren’t straight before they come out as gay, and transgender people are who they are before they come out and transition.”

There have always been people who expanded gender beyond the male/female binary. In ancient Greece and Asia Minor, priests of the deities Cybele and Attis were assigned male at birth but wore feminine clothes and often opted to castrate themselves. The first convert noted in the New Testament (Acts 8:27–39) was an Ethiopian eunuch, an earlier term for a person of transgender experience. According to Jewish and Roman scholars, men became eunuchs either through their own choice or through conscription.

In the fifth century in Lebanon, a person named Marina, known as a woman, changed his name to Marinos and entered a male monastery. He was so accepted as a man by his peers that he was falsely accused of fathering a child, whom he then adopted and raised as his own son. In 1577, King Henry III of France dressed in women's clothing and insisted on being addressed as Her Majesty.

In many places throughout the world, a wide variety of transgender communities have existed for thousands of years. These include the Kathoey and Hijra communities in Southeast Asia, the five gender roles traditionally recognized by the Sulawesi tribes of Africa, the Khanith groups on the Arabian Peninsula, the Fa'afafine of Samoa and other island nations, and the Zuni Ihamana in North America. Indeed, when the first Europeans arrived in the Americas, they encountered multiple communities that not only included gender-expansive people but centered and honored them as spiritual leaders with a closer connection to the spirit world or to a divine creator. The first nonbinary Euro-American person in the United States is recorded in the same year we became a nation: 1776. The Public Universal Friend was a twenty-three-year-old Quaker who, dying of disease that fall, was reanimated as a genderless teacher in the likeness of a genderless god and went on to live a genderless life, preaching throughout the Northeast.

While the modern news seems to focus on the lives of transgender women, until the past few decades it was transgender men who were more visible. This is because, under the Victorian era's Cult of Domesticity, women

lived private lives and men lived in public, so the stories of those living as men were more likely to be preserved. During the Civil War and the era of western expansion, over two hundred people who had been assigned female at birth enlisted as male soldiers. Many of them lived the remainder of their lives as male, even after being discharged from the military.

The stories in this book include descriptions of hard times and struggles, but ultimately are stories of what it means to thrive as a human, what it means to reach a place of euphoria that comes with true authenticity.

Jazz Jennings, who cowrote the foreword to the book with her mom Jeanette, responded to a media question about being transgender a few years ago by noting that “being transgender is not just a medical transition. It’s discovering who you are, living your life authentically, loving yourself, and spreading that love towards other people, and accepting one another no matter the difference.” Actor Elliott Page noted of his own experiences in coming out, “I can’t begin to express how remarkable it feels to finally love who I am enough to pursue my authentic self.”

The stories shared in the pages of this UU Common Read are lessons for each of us on what that type of authenticity looks like, and how we can each seek it in our own lives.

## Questions for Contemplation

*Authentic Selves* offers thirty-five stories from trans and nonbinary people and their families. These are people of every generation, from around the US and around the world, people of many races and backgrounds, and many occupations and professions. Even if you haven’t read all the way through the whole book, just in the first five stories we meet a variety of people and families.

- What story most resonated with you? What struck you about this story?
- What parts of this story resonated with your own lived experience? What parts were outside your experience?

## Storytelling as Faith Formation

- When you tell a story, how does that help you find or create meaning?
- When you tell your own story, how does that help you know yourself or make meaning from your own life?
- When you receive a story from another, how does it help you better understand your own story?
- When you receive a story from another, how does it help you to understand experiences you’ve never had?
- What is the power of story in our search for understanding and growth?

## What Is Family?

Many of the authors in *Authentic Selves* talk about the idea of “chosen family.” A chosen family means people who deliberately choose to love and support each other, regardless of marriage, blood relationship, or legally recognized forms of kinship, being members of a “House.” The concept of Houses comes out of Black ballroom culture and the way that trans people, especially, created homes and families within it. These are just some of the many concepts and constellations of family that are shared in *Authentic Selves*.

- How do these stories invite us to expand our own understandings of family?
- What is your definition of *family*?

- Have you had your idea of family stretched or challenged? When has it grown or changed to meet new circumstances or learned truths?
- What do we gain when we no longer assume that there can be only one family structure?

### Support in Families

The stories in *Authentic Selves* offer examples of loving support, of support denied, and of stumbles along the way to healthy support. The stories are told from multiple perspectives, and what one person needed for support was sometimes different from what another needed. Sometimes family members and others didn't realize that someone needed support.

- What stories did you read that showed examples of good and healthy support being offered within a family (using a broad understanding of what *family* means)?
- What challenges did some family members face in figuring out what support their family member needed and what mistakes did some of them make?
- How did these stories expand your understanding of what support trans and nonbinary people and their families might need?
- How did these stories expand your understanding of what giving and receiving support can look like for all people?

### Gender Euphoria

Review the terms *dysmorphia*, *gender dysphoria*, *gender euphoria*, *gender identity*, and *gender expression*, included in "Some Definitions" at the end of this guide.

We hear about gender dysphoria quite often, and it is true that this can be a great source of distress for many people. It is also true, and we are holding this truth with tenderness right now, that there are other ways that people can feel distress about their bodies. There are many kinds of dysmorphia. So for just one moment here, we pause to hold in tenderness and care the truth that some among us may have known pain, suffering, or trauma associated with some aspect of their body or gender.

Gender euphoria is less well known. Gender euphoria is when some aspect of your gender identity makes you feel whole, fulfilled, or simply happy. It is important to remember that joy and happiness are also part of the experience of trans and nonbinary people.

- When have you felt most whole and truly yourself? When have you felt most authentic in your gender? Does the term *gender euphoria* resonate for you?
- What do you celebrate about your gender? What do you enjoy about your gender?
- If you haven't celebrated or felt whole in your gender or your identity, what would doing that be like for you?
- What would you like to explain about gender to your younger self?
- How can we help people of all genders and identities celebrate themselves? How can we celebrate each other?

### Stories of Celebration

- How did one of the stories in *Authentic Selves* give you hope, either for its author or for yourself?
- What stories in *Authentic Selves* gave you greater understanding or helped you learn something new, either about yourself or about someone different from yourself?
- How do stories and the sharing of stories help bridge gaps and build understanding?

**Storytelling** can also be a form of emotional labor. Emotional labor is the usually invisible work that people are asked to do to manage their own emotions and actions in order to appease someone else. It's the labor of behaving in a certain way, displaying certain feelings and suppressing others, to make another person comfortable. For instance, restaurant customers often expect waitstaff to be cheerful and friendly, and may penalize them by tipping badly or complaining to management if they're not. People with marginalized identities are often expected to perform similar emotional labor to protect the feelings of more privileged people. Nonbinary and trans people may be expected to be "discreet": not to be open about either their joy in their gender or any anger or pain they may feel.

- When have you felt safe to share a vulnerable story, and what helped you feel that way? What lessons on storytelling and story sharing do you take from that?
- How can we reduce the amount of emotional labor demanded of marginalized people and invite, support, and celebrate their storytelling?

### **Next Steps**

- What steps could make the congregation more welcoming, supportive, and celebratory of people of all gender identities?
- Where in your congregational system would you go to do that work?
- What are some next moves for the congregation?
- What support can the congregation offer to its trans, nonbinary, gender-expansive, and gender-questioning members and friends, and to their legal and chosen families?
- What support does the congregation need? (Examples could include education, resources, and help with structural changes.)

### **Takeaways**

- What did you learn from your engagement with this book and this group? What are your takeaways?
- What learning and growing is next for you? What are you still working through?

### **For More Information and Learning**

- Charis Circle discussion of AUTHENTIC SELVES: CELEBRATING TRANS AND NONBINARY PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES with people who participated in the creation of the book: <https://youtu.be/lqg6d12Fb40?si=eTfMGB0WhYu6t-st>
- Transgender School Ep 32 | Part 1 and Part 2: Authentic Selves: Celebrating Trans and Nonbinary People & Their Families <https://transgenderschool.org>  
Ep 32 | Part 1: Authentic Selves  
Ep 32, Part 2: Authentic Selves

### **Sources for Support and Advocacy**

See all the UUA guides, handouts, and resources for Authentic Selves here: <https://www.uua.org/read>

### **For Trans and Nonbinary People Specifically**

**Trans Lifeline** Run by and for trans and nonbinary people, the Trans Lifeline offers a hotline staffed by trained trans and nonbinary operators and a microgrants program providing direct financial support.

**National Center for Transgender Equality** The NCTE advocates for transgender equality in policy and law in Washington, DC, and tracks state legislative actions affecting trans people. It also provides resource guides to help transgender people and their families navigate legal and rights issues.

**UPLIFT Programs** UPLIFT offers online gathering space and pastoral care for trans and nonbinary people of all ages (including children, youth, adults, and elders) that is UU focused but open to non-UUs as well.

### **For Trans and Nonbinary People and Their Families**

**PFLAG** PFLAG is a national organization supporting both LGBTQ+ people and their families, with local chapters and online connection opportunities. Families can find resources and support groups through PFLAG. You may have a local chapter near you. In Canada, visit the [PFLAG Canada](#) website.

**Lambda Legal** Lambda Legal works for lived and legal full equality for LGBTQ+ and HIV+ people. It offers a legal help desk and many resources for understanding your legal rights as a trans person or family.

**Doc Impossible's blog Stained Glass Woman** A long post with advice for parents of trans and nonbinary youth.

**GLSEN** GLSEN is a national network that was founded by teachers with a mission to transform K-12 schools into safe and affirming places for LGBTQ+ students. Most states have a chapter.

### **For Congregations and Allies**

**Transforming Hearts Collective**. The Transforming Hearts Collective works to shift faith communities into places where trans and nonbinary people can be their full selves and be welcomed. It offers a Trans Inclusion in Congregations self-directed online course that congregational groups can take together.

**The UUA's Welcoming Congregations Program** A voluntary program for congregations that want to do the work of undoing homophobia and transphobia and becoming spaces of radical welcome. It includes practices for renewing welcome, for congregations that have previously completed the program. <https://www.uua.org/read/authentic-selves/handouts/handout-3-1>

### **Some Definitions**

**Dysmorphia.** Distress, sometimes extreme, that a person experiences about a characteristic of their body or physical appearance.

**Gender.** The socially constructed characteristics that people are assumed to have based on their assigned sex. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

**Gender binary.** The system in which gender is constructed as two strict categories, male and female. Under the gender binary, a person's gender identity, gender expression, and social role and behavior are expected to align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender dysphoria.** Clinically significant distress caused by a mismatch between a person's assigned birth gender and the one with which they identify.

**Gender euphoria.** Joy or happiness felt about one's own gender identity, gender expression, or the way one or both of them are perceived.

**Gender-expansive.** Having a wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than is allowed for by the gender binary. The phrase is often used as an umbrella term for young people still exploring the possibilities of their gender expression and/or gender identity.

**Gender expression.** The external manifestation or appearance of one's gender identity, usually through behavior, clothing, body characteristics, or voice. A person's gender expression may or may not match the behaviors and characteristics typically associated with their gender.

**Gender-fluid.** Not identifying with a single, fixed gender, or having a fluid or unfixed gender identity.

**Gender identity.** An individual's internal sense of being a man, a woman, neither of these, both of these, or some other gender or genders.

**Genderqueer.** Rejecting static categories of gender in favor of a fluidity of gender identity and often, though not always, sexual orientation. People who identify as genderqueer may see themselves as being both male and female, as neither male nor female, or as falling completely outside these categories.

**Intersex.** Having genetic and/or developmental differences from the norm in sex traits and/or reproductive anatomy. Intersex variations appear in many forms, including differences in genitalia, chromosomes, gonads, internal sex organs, hormone production, hormone response, and secondary sex traits.

**Nonbinary.** Not identifying exclusively as either a man or a woman. Nonbinary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, as being somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many nonbinary people also identify as transgender, not all do. “Nonbinary” can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, genderqueer, and gender-fluid.

**Sex assigned at birth.** The sex—male, female, or intersex—that a doctor or midwife categorizes a child as at birth, on the basis of their external anatomy.

**Transgender.** Having a gender identity and/or expression different from what is culturally associated with the sex the person was assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation; transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or any other orientation.

**Transitioning.** Undertaking a set or series of processes to live more fully as one’s true gender. There are several kinds of transition. Social transition may include changing one’s name and pronouns; medical transition may include hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries; and legal transition may include changing one’s legal name and/or sex and obtaining updated identity documents. Transgender people may choose to undergo some, all, or none of these processes.

Most of these terms are taken from the Human Rights Coalition. The UUA publishes its own list, but it includes some outdated terms, so we suggest using this one.

<https://www.uua.org/read/authentic-selves/handouts/handout-1-2>

Reading Guide: Adapted from the UUA *Authentic Selves* Guide for Any/Mixed UU Group / Unity LBT / January 2025