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## Outside the Box: Nonbinary

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"Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life."

This is the first advice given to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain in our book of *Advices and Queries*, given to us as "a challenge and an inspiration?". It can be difficult to take heed to those promptings when the journey they take us on is one that we hadn't ever conceived of.

When I was a teenager, I knew I was bisexual; I experienced attraction in multiple directions and I knew the words to describe my experience. Having the words meant that I could talk to my friends and my parents about what was important to me. I also knew, because we could talk about it, that this was more-or-less OK with people at church and that it was definitely OK with the people who felt most important to me. I was a very lucky teenage, bisexual Christian: a lot of my friends had much more difficulty reconciling these parts of their lives. Part of what drew me to Quakers when I was looking for a religious community to settle in as an adult was the knowledge that my bisexuality wouldn't be an issue.

In contrast...

When I was a teenager I ...sometimes described myself as a boy, but I was bookish and hippyish and not a typical tomboy. I identified with male characters in films and books, but usually with the male characters who stood out as unusually emotional? and I identified with stoical or emotionally-repressed, butch female characters. I knew that if I could magic away the gendered parts of my body, I would. I asked family, friends

and teachers to call me Fred, and everyone did. I was extremely lucky that my parents helped me to work out what adjustments we could make (to clothes, haircut and name), to lessen my discomfort, even though we didn't know the right combinations of words to describe this to others or to seek external support.

Without a simple way of explaining why I wanted it, I didn't feel able to ask my university or my new friends to use my preferred name, and so I reverted to using the name that was on my documents. I was fairly sure I wasn't a transgender man, so I must be a woman, because I had no word for anything in between.

I spent a lot of my twenties trying to grow out of it and settle down into womanhood, and then, just around the time I turned thirty, when it was clear that 'growing out of it' was not going to happen, I encountered the concepts of genderqueer and non-binary gender, and gradually realised that these were the words to describe my experience. Having words for my experience of my self was hugely liberating - it helps to clarify thoughts and feelings, it allows me to find other people with similar experiences and to talk about all this stuff with people close to me.

I started (again?) making changes that I think of as aspects of gender transition about six years ago, in my early thirties. I changed my name (to Fred, again) and pronouns and, after much soul-searching and counselling, I have made some physical changes to enable me to live comfortably in my body and see it as home.

My experience of being a transgender Quaker in the communities who know me has been positive. As members of a religious community that strives to be Spirit-led, to take heed of the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, Friends believed what I told them about my deep self and about my lived experiences. Friends offered support where they could help make life more comfortable, and, crucially, treated me exactly the same as always except when gender was relevant. I am seen as a whole person of which my gender is only one aspect.

In the last couple of years there has been a growing backlash against transgender rights and inclusion in the public sphere - an echo of the push back against gay and lesbian rights in the 1980s that led to the homophobic legislation of Section 28 - and this has influenced conversations among Quakers. I have been told by (a tiny minority of) other Quakers that I am delusional and mutilated, that my existing in public as a trans person is promoting harmful ideology and is fundamentally untruthful. I have been told that I must engage 'critique of transgender identities' as if I could just be persuaded not to be transgender after all.

I am worn out.

My hope for the future is that we can, among Quakers and more widely, meet each other as fellow human beings with vulnerabilities, listen deeply to one another's experiences, and seek that of God in one another. I hope that we can find ways to move forward together, to take heed to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts and to trust them as the leadings of God.

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*Written by Fred Langridge, a nonbinary, transgender Quaker. Fred's (occasional) blog is [assumebenevolence.wordpress.com/\[1\]](https://assumebenevolence.wordpress.com/)*

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### **Links**

[1] <https://assumebenevolence.wordpress.com/>