

MY LIFE AS A BOX

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

How often have I heard (and believed) the mantra, "There is no such thing as objective reality. We each create our own subjective reality in every situation we encounter." I have always taken some comfort in this thought, as it absolves me from judging others for their belief systems. Having been raised in a judgmental atmosphere, I feel very light when I consider myself free from the burden of having to judge others, or being judged by them.

However, when I consider gender, do I really believe there is no objective reality? Is gender entirely subjective? Something about this concept makes me uncomfortable. Perhaps it's my culture showing. Those raised in mainstream U.S. culture need our categories rigid and fixed. If gender is entirely subjective, then it is also entirely fluid and open to definition by every individual. Since I *do* believe this is the case, then the discomfort I feel is my socialization. The question then becomes, how easily can any of us overcome our socialization? (He asks, plaintively – "Will I *ever* be entirely comfortable with the gender fluidity I know exists?")

It's a difficult thing to admit, this discomfort. Yet I think it's also the elephant in the middle of the room in which any conversation takes place about gender. It reminds me of the great difficulty I had ten years ago fully accepting that racism is a white issue, for me to deal with in my white self. More recently, I have come to understand that racism is a *people* issue, for everyone to deal with in themselves, but that it plays out quite differently for each person based on their racial self-perception and how others perceive them. So it is with gender, playing out quite differently for each person based on their gender self-perception and how others perceive them. I feel no more compulsion to define another's gender identity than I do to define another's race. But lack of compulsion to define is not synonymous with total comfort!

There is another dimension to considering the subjectiveness of reality, and that is agency. How much agency, free will, does any of us have when we claim the right to define our own identities? I titled this piece "My Life as a Box" because I feel little agency when I am faced with a bureaucratic form that requires I check "Male" or "Female." A long time ago, I decided I felt "Not-female," for lack of a better term, rather than "Female" or "Male." Yet that option is not available on any form I've ever seen. It does no good to cross out the available categories and write my own. This merely results in confusion for data entry operators, who either call me for clarification (read: "we need you to choose so we can enter this in the computer"), or edit my form using their best guess as to whether I'm male or female (sic).

I try hard to break free of the box of my socialization, and society fights back through its various bureaucracies, keeping me tied to its pre-defined boxes. What a constant battle! Not only do I fight my own socialization, I also fight the constant reinforcement of the values and definitions of that socialization. No wonder I'm tired!

What would it look like to not engage in the fight any longer? I've heard so many activists say, "You've got to pick your battles, or you burn out." In this case, does not fighting mean I've given in to my socialization? Not an option, given my beliefs about gender fluidity! Or does it mean I define my socialization as part of my history? I don't generally like therapist jargon and pop psychology sayings, but I do like "that was then, this is now." Okay... my socialization was "then," from the mid 1950's onward. But what is "now" if not a continuous flow of time from the past to the present moment? Is it possible to disconnect the past from the present, and is this what it means to be freed from one's socialization?

I don't think the disconnect is possible – the past exists in memory, which can't be erased. The trick is to not empower the past to overwhelm the present. After all, we can only *live* in the present moment. The past only exists in our memories, and the future in our dreams. The boxes of our socialization were created in some past time, by people other than ourselves, and this makes it quite tricky to live in the moment. My goal is to divorce myself from ownership of the boxes themselves. I did not create my own socialization. I had no agency in accepting - or not - the socialization handed me in my cradle. I try to modify the toolset as best I can, but those tools have acquired a fair amount of inertia over a lifetime. Often I find myself having to reshape an attitude or belief again and again, as it keeps trying to morph itself back into my mother's voice.

I wish it was as easy for me as it is for a computer. Oh, to be so literal and binary! No shades of gray, just dots, either black or white, 0 or 1. How simple! But then... how much fun are computers? Don't we all find ourselves swearing at our computers at least once a day because they can't read our minds, because they don't follow our intuitive leaps? Because they are incapable of thought? Because they are incapable of being without a box. Perhaps I am, too, but at least I can dream of the day. And "perhaps" is not "never." "Perhaps" is a goal.

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