

So often when we hear stories of Jesus casting out demons, like in the story of the so-called Gerasene demoniac we search for ways to understand these stories in our context. Most of us in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada don't believe in the existence of demons so we try to understand what is going with the man in the tombs. Why is he so unruly? Why cannot he be subdued? In order to understand this some postulate that the Gerasene demoniac has a mental illness and that Jesus cured him.

Not that I believe in demons but I think there are a couple of problems with the interpretation of assigning a mental illness to the man in the tombs.

The first is the very construction of mental illness in our culture. I say this as a person who has long been labelled with a mental illness. I believe they are calling it Gender Dysphoria nowadays. As Jesus calls us to question our institutions and the power dynamics of our structures I think it is important to interrogate the psychiatric industry. And I hope to do it with love. With Mad Trans love!

Now, you may have received healing and comfort through the psychiatric industry and for that I give thanks. In critiquing the psychiatric industry, I am not advocating its wholesale removal but rather growth and reform so that we can increase the healing of the world.

And I want to start my questioning of the psychiatric industry with resisting the idea that people who behave differently should be considered ill at all. It is OK to be different, even scruffy muttering in the street different. Yes, we must reach out and take care of one another but we must be careful not to pathologize difference.

I am speaking out of my experience as a trans woman and how I have been labeled mad or crazy. One the things that people have the largest trouble understanding is the practice of seeking healing through surgery and in the case of trans women it's the desire to remove our testes.

Even today, after the so-called transgender tipping point, and just so you know there will be no tipping point until there is liberation and equity for all, even after the so-called transgender tipping point people can't believe that

someone would desire the removal of testes. People can't imagine self-castration as healing even though it has been happening around the world for thousands of years. In the Ancient Mediterranean world there were the Galli, eunuch priestess of the Magna Mater cult. In southern Asia we have the Hijra, eunuchs who have been castrating themselves as long as we know. But still there is this idea that if you want to remove your testes you must be crazy. You must be mad! But I can only respond with Mad Trans Love!

I remember seeing Peterson Toscano, the gay performance artist and biblical exegete, who himself spent years in faith based ex-gay therapy, perform Transfigurations his one-person play that reimagines biblical interpretations of gender. Toscano's performance was trans-positive, sensitive and affirming with important insights into scripture and the construction of gender then and now.

But during the Q&A following his performance the topic of eunuchs came up. While in the ancient

Mediterranean world there are many different ways of being for eunuchs we most often think of Eunuchs as the guard to the harem room. While this is one of the activities assigned to Eunuchs it was really much broader than that. Eunuchs were often high ranking bureaucrats. The Ethiopian Eunuch in the book of Acts for example was the treasurer for queen Candace of Ethiopia.

These Eunuchs were castrated prior to puberty and groomed for their careers as bureaucrats. When Toscano described this you could see and feel the horror he felt at the thought of castration. It was as if the removal of testes is the worst thing that could happen. Whereas I as a trans woman felt something completely different. I felt hope and kinship and acceptance.

Don't get me wrong, no one should be castrated against their will and while many children desire castration from an early age we should absolutely wait until the child is old enough to express informed consent. In the case of Ethiopian Eunuchs there is no evidence either way to suggest whether they desired castration or not.

But there is an assumption that castration is traumatic as opposed to liberating and the point I am trying to make is that the desire to remove one's testes is something that has always existed. And it's good. It's Mad Trans Love.

But in this white, androcentric reality we've created, in the colonized West self-castration really is crazy. In today's world we assign fortitude and strength to testes. When someone stands up for themselves or takes a risk even women will say that took balls. Testes are seen to be the source of strength and power. You'd have to be mad to want to get rid of them even though people born with testes have been removing them for all times in a multiplicity of contexts and cultures.

You see, I don't think my gender is sign of mental illness so much as difference. As I said there has always been self-castration. Not a lot. Not everybody. Just a few people but it's always there. A world where a few people desire castration is actually normal.

And I don't mean to privilege surgery or say that you have to have surgery or take hormones or dress a certain

way or that I am in anyway allowed to define your gender. I don't get to define what is to be transgender or who is trans enough.

I am in solidarity with gender queer and gender fluid people. While that is not my reality affirm your right to express your gender in a way that is most comfortable and life giving to you. You do what you need to do in body and in Spirit in order to flourish. I respect and celebrate all kinds of difference. I'm filled with Mad Trans Love.

But the reason I am speaking of castration is that there is a particular way that trans women have been harmed by western world through the psychiatric industry which has labelled people like me mad for desiring to modify my body.

Many years ago I was suffering from depression and I sought the help of a psychiatrist. When the subject of my trans-ness came up for 15 years psychiatrists advised me to stay in the closet and embrace masculinity. I was subjected to reparative therapy, similar to the ex-gay therapy that Peterson Toscano received. I was told that I

was just having fantasies. I could never be a woman because being born with testes made me a man. I was effectively held in the closet for years. I first went to psychiatrists for depression and they prescribed staying in the closet. It is cruelly ironic is that I eventually alleviated my depression by transitioning.

And I got off easy. Not only do I benefit from white and middle-class privilege but I escaped some barbaric treatment by the psychiatric industry. In the 1980s at the Clarke institute in Toronto the psychiatrists would hook up monitors to trans women's genitals and monitor blood flow while showing them pornography. There has been reparative therapy practiced on children there until this past fall. There can be no doubt that the extremely high rate of suicide among trans people is at least in part to our treatment in the psychiatric industry which has done little help in the wider acceptance of trans people.

I'm suggesting that much of the suffering of trans people is not their inherent trans-ness but that the suffering is imposed from outside. This is informed by the

story of the man in the tombs in Gerasa. We see a man suffering wildly in a way that cannot be contained. No one can subdue him as he howled all night.

When Jesus arrives he is drawn out of the tombs and approaches Jesus and says, 'Jesus, Son of the Most High God? By God, Leave me alone!' But when Jesus asks the man from the tombs for his name, he replies, "I am legion for we are many!"

I am legion. This oft quoted phrase was code for the occupying Roman Imperial Army. Legions referred to their Roman military divisions. There is no other interpretation for legion. And at the time in Jerasa on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire there were several divisions stationed there.

The hidden transcript that the author of Mark was telling us said that the demons represented the Roman Empire. So the demons who are causing all the distress are actually the colonizing Roman Empire. Of course this is a direct attack on the Roman Empire is intended to convey that the occupying Romans are the problem on a



broad scale. But there is a point to be made in the particular as well.

The point I am lifting up is that the affliction of the so-called Gerasene demoniac was imposed from the outside, from the Empire. And that is what I am saying happens to trans people today through the psychiatric industry. Our madness is imposed from the outside through the psychiatric industry among other forces.

Even if you accept my thesis with respect to trans people you might say that that doesn't really describe the Gerasene demoniac. He wasn't trans. The obvious analogy is that he had schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder. But I think we must be careful about making simplistic analogies. We just saw how the point of the story is that the distress was imposed from the outside.

And the fact is that many people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder resist the labels of mental illness. Instead much like I have been saying about trans people they reject the illness model and instead assert that they are simply different. They

resist the idea that they should be locked up or forced to take mind altering drugs.

This is part of what some people call the mad pride movement. That is, people who are labelled mad or crazy say that they are not ill they are just different. They seek relief and healing through many avenues.

Groups such as the Icarus Project seek to overcome the limitations of a world determined to label, categorize, and sort human behavior. The desire to label, categorize and sort human behaviour is like the demons imposed by the Roman Occupation.

The Icarus Project envision a “new culture that allows the space and freedom for exploring different states of being. They suggest that breakdown can be the entrance to breakthrough.” They are saying that there are other ways of being, that while society may say someone is mentally ill, those influenced by the Mad Pride movement are saying that we have to move from illness to difference.

Again, I am not trying to cause divisions. There many people diagnosed with mental illness are consumers of the

psychiatric industry and have been helped. And that should be an option open to them. If you have found healing through pharmaceuticals, then I shout prayers of thanks but there are many who have explored other ways of healing. People are different and they take different paths to healing.

I think any response to difference has to include bodily autonomy. I can't tell you what to do with your body and you can't tell me what to do with mine. Feminists have been saying for decades that we must have the right to our own bodies. Free and open access to abortion for those who desire is a human right. Trans women and trans men other differently gendered folk should have access to hormones and surgeries.

And people diagnosed with mental illness must have autonomy over their treatment. We must stop forcing drugs and invasive therapies like electro convulsive therapy on people. People should be allowed to decide their own paths to healing.

And those paths to healing require the celebration of difference. It needs Mad Trans Love. We are not all the same, we are different and we are glorious in our difference and nothing can separate us from the love of God.

As the prophet Isaiah tells us

Do not let the eunuch say,

‘I am just a dry tree.’

For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,

who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant,

I will give, in my house and within my walls,

a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name

that shall not be cut off.

Difference is good. You are good. You are a child of God. And you are loved in the way you are. You are loved just the way you are in Mad Trans Love.

Amen.

### References

<http://theicarusproject.net/about-us/icarus-project-mission-statement>. Viewed on March 3, 2016.