The word transgender is relatively new. It first appeared in an academic paper in the 1960s. Now, if you're like me, and you grew up in the Baby Boomer generation, there's a pretty good chance that you did not know anything about what trans or transgender is, or what it means. And why would you? It wasn't a part of your everyday life and it wasn't openly discussed. But here, on Conversations That Matter, that serves as an invitation to learn more about our ever-changing world. Now, with the recent enactment of Bill C-16 here in Canada, which ensures that transgendered people are guaranteed the same human rights as those who identify, like me, with the gender I was assigned at birth. It seemed to be a perfect time to sit down with transgender activist and author, Lisa Salazar, for a conversation that matters. Lisa Salazar, welcome to Conversations That Matter. By the time this airs, we're a few days beyond the enactment of Bill C-16 in department and into law, which gives full human rights to people who are transgendered. So, that's what I wanna talk about today. What does it mean to be transgender? What exactly is transgender, and how do those of us who want to know more come to understand what that experience is like for somebody who is living that journey? You've lived that journey.

- Yes.

- How important is, let's start with how important Bill C-16 is?

- The legislation is really important because it becomes the basis of being able to educate society. I think one of the pushbacks in enacting the bill was the argument that we already have all the protection that we need under the charter, under the category of sex. That may be so, technically speaking, and many human rights tribunals have agreed with that, including MBC. The problem is that, when the language is not explicit, then you always have to argue, make the same arguments over and over again, and then will hear the same counter-arguments from those who are defending their position.
- Does it protect people against discrimination primarily?

- Against discrimination, yes.

- [Stuart] Right, yes.

- And it spells it out on the basis of gender identity and gender expression. Without those phrases or those words in there, we have to argue that we're being discriminated on the basis of sex, and that doesn't always convince everybody, and so it's really important to have clear and explicit language, not just because now the courts and everybody, human resource departments and corporations and institutions, have clear language that they can employ in their own policies, but it helps, little by little, to educate society. Because the fact is that just because you pass a law doesn't mean everybody's gonna respect it, and it's really important to not just say gender identity, but also gender expression, because the reality is that many people who are on the transgender spectrum, almost 1/3 of them fall into the category or are self-identified as non-binary, which is a relatively recent term that's being used and employed by people to define who they are, because they are challenging the society's binary normality of it's either male, masculine males, and feminine females, so now we're having a conversation, a much wider conversation, a much more open conversation, where people who are struggling to figure out how they fit in this binary world, they're saying, well, I'm neither.

- Yeah.

- Or I'm both.

- Right, you mentioned something that I find interesting, and I think it helps us to define what it means to be trans, because you said on the trans spectrum.

- Yes.

- What is that spectrum? How do we define it from one side to the next?

- That's right. What needs to be understood, too, is that the word transgender is a relatively new term.

- So, is trans and transgender, are they interchangeable?

- Interchangeable, yes.

- Okay, okay, yeah.

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- So, the word transgender was first coined, probably, in the 60s, and it did not appear in any academic writings until about 1965, in a book where a therapist or psychologist is writing about sexual disorders, and is talking about those individuals who are transvestite.

- But that's not necessarily transgender, is it?

- No, no, no, but that's, so, when he uses the word transgender, it's to bring some clarification to another term that was coined at about that time, which is transsexual.

- Yes.

- Okay, now, transsexual has a much more clinical interpretation, which is a transsexual is someone who wants to undergo medical, and in other words, hormone therapy, and surgical transition in order to bring their body into alignment with how they identify internally, and because they're employing medicine and surgery, then it's a very clinical term, so transsexual is sort of, people who are transsexual were those individuals, who weren't just happy wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. It had nothing to do with sexual gratification, which was what a transvestite was classically understood to be, was someone who dresses in the clothes of the opposite sex for sexual gratification. So, these individuals who are classified as transsexual were individuals who, it was beyond the need to dress for sexual gratification. It was the personal identity.

- And that's the key, isn't it? It's about identity.

- Personal identity. But then, we're wanting to take advantage of advances in medicine and in surgery, 'cause plastic surgery, again, is relatively new, and an available tool to doctors, and to be able to transform genitalia to conform more to the anatomy of the sex that you identify was in its infancy. Now, this writer, in 1965, says that, that if a person has needs or desires beyond just simply dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex, then they would be a transsexual, but then he says, more correctly, it should be transgender, because it has nothing to do with sexuality. It has nothing to do with sexual behavior. That's the first time that the word transgender appears in an academic book.

- Just gonna ask you to hang on for a second while we take a quick commercial break. We'll be right back.

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- To be transsexual, transgender at that time must have been a very, very lonely experience for them.
- But it was still under the lens of homosexuality.

- But it’s not.

- But it’s not, but it was all conflated. It was all part of that lens, so then, move forward, this is 1966. So, things were progressing. More and more individuals are undergoing this transformation, and you get to about the 1980s, and these protocols that were developed by Harry Benjamin had some very strict guidelines. There was a lot of gate-keeping, so a therapist who might be working with someone who was transsexual would be categorizing the person on all kinds of attributes: physicality, will they make convincing women?

- These were determining factors as two whether or not you could move forward with treatment?

- Yes, because they wanted, the idea then was the therapist was gonna help you get from box A to box B as effectively and realistically as possible, or from box B to box A, and if they felt that there were things, handicaps, to you achieving that real presence, feminine presence or masculine presence, then they would say no, you don't qualify for this.

- How horrible that must have been.

- So, a lot of individuals not only could not afford the process, but knew that they would be disqualified, so what about them? So the term transgender starts to be used in those early days of modem connection, with AOL and CompuServe, and there are groups that are forming, chat groups that are forming, where people are talking and somebody begins to use the word transgender as this is who we are. We're not transsexual because we don't meet those requirements, and we can't afford to meet those requirements anyway. So, I'm transgender, because it has nothing to do with sex and it has everything to do with how I feel inside, so it's not until the late 80s that the word transgender comes into, in a sense, the public discourse, and that's the first time I heard the word transgender. I was almost 40 before I heard the word transgender, and up to that point, I didn't know why I felt the way I did. So, there was this vacuum of information, and suddenly in, let's say, 1990, now we have the word transgender, and now people are talking and says yeah, that's what I am, because I'm not a transvestite. I'm not a transsexual because I can't afford surgery, and so the word transsexual has always had that finality, that final destination, that you are someone who has modified your body to conform to how you identify.

- But that's not necessarily the case with being transgender?

- No, so the word transgender has, over time, become more of an umbrella term to incorporate or to include all those individuals who don't feel comfortable identifying fully as male or fully as female. They feel more like the other gender or sex. Okay, so the other word or the other term is gender dysphoria, Conversations That Matter is an Oh Boy Productions program. Please help us to continue to produce this program by making a donation at www.conversationsthatmatter.tv
and so gender dysphoria means that you experience the stress and discomfort and sadness about your gender. But that's a spectrum in terms. Some people have, just like many other spectrums.

- This is our second break. We'll be back in a moment.

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- So, as somebody who lives outside of that experience, because it's not my experience, but I want to understand, how do I ignite a conversation that says I'm open to understanding in a world where people who are, you know, on that journey are going to be highly guarded? How do I find common ground?

- Okay, well, the starting point, obviously, is to have that inclination, that you want to know.

- Yeah, right.

- Because if you don't wanna know and you say that's a bunch of bullshit, pardon my language, and that's crazy.

- Then the gate comes down on that conversation, yeah.

- So, the first step is that inclination. You need to say okay, I'll be honest, I don't understand it, but I wanna be respectful.

- [Stuart] Yeah. I sincerely wanna be respectful. Help me understand. I was so happy when I sent out my coming out letter to many of my friends and clients. Some of them asked that version of your question. They said wow, I don't know anything about this. I'm gonna learn so much, and can you point me to resources, things that I can read, because I wanna know how to support you. That, to me, that was answer to prayer, because I, you know, what kept me from doing anything about this until I was 56.

- 56?

- Yes, I was 56 when I finally made the decision I'm going to accept what the doctors at the Vancouver General Hospital Gender Clinic offered me in 1999, seven years earlier, 'cause I'd gone for assessment, and it had taken me nine years to get there, because in 1990, when the word transgender's now available to me, I went to see a psychiatrist for the first time, and I had three session with the guy, and he was very honest. He said, you know, this is not something I understand or really know a lot of. I've spoken to other individuals who, like yourself, struggle with your gender identity, but there's a new clinic that opened up at Vancouver General Hospital. I'd like to refer you to them because they're the Conversations That Matter is an Oh Boy Productions program. Please help us to continue to produce this program by making a donation at www.conversationsthatmatter.tv
experts. They're working with people like yourself, and I remember thinking, the way I had survived all these years was by embracing a very fundamentalist, evangelical form of Christianity that saw this as an abomination, as something that needed to be fixed, that God had the power to do that, and I was, for 40 years, crying out to Him. Please make me normal. I want this to go away, for the sake of my family, 'cause I was married and had three sons, for the sake of my parents, for the sake of my career, for the sake of not having to ever, you know, have to tell anyone that I struggled with this very secret thing, that I've always struggled since I was a little kid with, this very confusing stuff for which I had no language. So, in 1990, my psychiatrist said I'd like to refer you. I said no, no, no, no. There's no way. Nine years later, I got myself referred to the Gender Clinic.

- It took you that long to feel comfortable with getting.

- No, no, I wasn't comfortable, because I figured, this is how I was thinking, nine years have gone by. They've done more research. They now must have a way to fix this, to make it go away, so let's call the Gender.

- That was your thinking?

- That was my thinking. Let's call the Gender Clinic and see how they can fix this and make it go away. So, I go through six months of assessments. I become educated in terms of how it all works, and when I get the diagnosis that I have acute gender dysphoria, I said so, how do I make it go away. No, it doesn't go away, but we can help you. Here are some of the things that individuals have done, and it wasn't like here's what you have to do. This is what people have done, and these are your options. These are hard decisions to make. You're a married person with children. You're self-employed. We can't make those decisions for you. You need to sit down with your wife and make these decisions, but we're here. And I remember saying to the psychiatrist, saying I can't do this. I can't pay that price. I just want this to go away. Thanks for your help, goodbye, and I walked out of that place thinking I guess I'll take this to my grave, because I can't do this. By 2006, I was in a real dark place. I was thinking about dying all the time. I wanted to die.

- Because you wanted it to go away.

- I wanted it to go away and it hadn't gone away. God, why haven't you made this go away? I hadn't been able to reconcile my faith to what the doctors had told me, because in the back of my mind was this very evangelical Christian. I put things in two different boxes: man's wisdom, God's wisdom, and they don't always go hand in hand, so whose wisdom am I gonna pay attention to? So I was not able to reconcile what the doctors told me, which was man's wisdom, with what I read in the Bible with respect to creation, and that was my struggle, and lo and behold, it took a new pastor to come to our church. It was an evangelical church here in Vancouver, and in his very first sermon, he held up his Bible and he said many people look at this book and they say this has all the answers we need to live, and he said I'm Conversations That Matter is an Oh Boy Productions program.
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not one of those persons. This book does not contain all the answers to the human condition. There's a lot of gaps. There's a lot of ambiguity. There are a lot of contradictions, and to say otherwise would be a lie. However, I value what the scriptures say and I approach this book with a lot of humility, and I have learned that it's really dangerous to extract a few phrases from here and there from which to develop a theology or dogma, and I will never do that. Things are not black and white.

- So, does this, then, give you permission? Yourself, you give yourself permission to move forward?

- I think that's a good word. I think that's the right word. I think after I began to meditate on this and look at the passage, and then read the story, the Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, where there's inclusion. The early church was really characterized by inclusion of those who had been excluded from the economy, of God's economy, and so that's what finally, yes, it gave me that sense of permission, that oh my God, there's nothing wrong with me.

- Lisa, this is a fascinating conversation, but we're gonna hang on for one last break. We'll be back in a moment.

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- This ignites 10,000 other questions that I have. You're married. You have children. How do you broach that subject with them? What happens with those relationships, and then how do you start to share what you're about to do with others?

- So, one of the statements I made, laments that I made to the psychiatrist at the Gender Clinic was, you know, I think it'll be just easier if I die and go away, and he said why do you say that? I said because it's gonna be disruptive, it's potentially destructive to my wife, to my marriage. It's gonna devastate my sons. It's gonna devastate my parents. My career is going to implode. I think it's better if I just go away, and he said okay, how many people know you? I said I don't know. He said okay, I've learned that you taught at Capilano College. How many students did you teach over the years? I said well, let's say 300. Okay, your family owned a restaurant. How many people did you know through the restaurant, staff and customers? Okay, I don't know, that could be 500. Churches, you've been attending several churches in Vancouver over the years. How many people got to know you? Okay, another 500. So, right there, you have over 1,000 people who know who you are, who knows who Jim Salazar is, and I said okay, I had never really thought about that. I said okay. He goes on, if it were possible for me to ask every single one of them, would you rather have Jim live the rest of his life as a woman or for him not to be here, which would you prefer? And he said I guarantee you that every single person would say I'd rather that they be here as a woman than not to be here. So he said just think about that, and I think that was the antidote

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that I needed, because that kept me from, in the years that followed after that, from doing something stupid.

- Are you at peace now?

- Yes, yes.

- Yeah?

- Very much so.

- But, has life presented you with other challenges that, you know, we still live in a world where there are people who are gonna go I don't understand.

- Yeah.

- And so, does that create another set of challenges for you?

- Absolutely, and for example my career as a self-employed graphic designer, all my clients, without exception, were incredibly supportive when I sent out the letter or when I read it to them in person. They all said the things I needed to hear. This makes no difference. You're an amazingly talented person. Business is business. As long as you're doing the work, as long as we're happy with things, we're gonna keep using you. It makes no difference. The reality is, however, so in the last four years I've sent out 400 resumes. I've had two interviews. Nothing's happened, so my conclusion is great place to live, safe place to live, but we're still seen through a very narrow lens and people are still uncomfortable.

- And you haven't been able to rebuild your own business, your own client base?

- No. So, I went back to school and did a master's degree in public and pastoral leadership. I was always very spiritual, very interested in theology, and my hope was to train as a chaplain so that I could offer spiritual support to the trans community, which, by default, I started doing it anyway, so right now, I'm still doing that training through Vancouver Coastal Health and a pilot project in the downtown east side. It's called Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE, and I'm part of a team of six people, and we're there, engaging with the community members, so yeah, my life has gone in a totally different trajectory. My only income today is my CPP and old age security, because I have no graphic design work.

- It's a tough journey to be on, but as you say, you're much more at peace.

- And I'm alive.

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- And you're alive. Well, thank you ever so much, Lisa Salazar.

- You're very welcome.

- For sharing your story, and hopefully, giving others the strength to find their own inner peace.

- Yeah, thank you.

- Thank you.