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SAVAGE LOVE

GENDER SOLID
BY DAN SAVAGE



You may not be the right person to answer this, but your commenters might be able to help. I love and support my friends who are transgender, but I don't understand all the 18- to 21-year-olds among my friends who are declaring themselves "gender-neutral." I am a bit older and have always been interested in queer culture and history. But it feels like they have forgotten, or never knew, that butch lesbians who wear strap-ons are still women, or that it is very common for straight men to wear lacy underwear. They don't seem to know that they can be gender nonconforming without having to discard gender. Because they're so young and all of them have decided this at the same time, it seems to be some kind of trend. Some may be on their way to coming out as trans, which is fair enough, but I strongly suspect some of them will be completely conventional in a couple of years. It would be rude and dismissive of me to tell them that it's just a phase, so I would never do that, but I don't really understand the point of being gender-neutral. What has changed in the last few years that this is suddenly a thing?

Longtime Reader

Ah, gender identities—you need an Excel spreadsheet to keep track these days. Some folks are gender-neutral, some are bigender, some are agender. Then there's pangender, genderless, genderfluid, and genderqueer. There's also gender-nonconforming, gender-questioning, gender-variant, as well as genderfuck, trigender, and intergender. (Who gets a hyphen and who doesn't? Who the fuck-knows?) Add in every genderblueplatespecial's very own set of random and unpredictable and ever-shifting pronoun preferences, and you've got a blizzard of special snowflakes, each one primed to take offense at some real or imagined microaggression so they can dash to Tumblr for some macro-venting. What has changed in the last few years? There's more discussion about gender now, LR, and that's a good thing. Culturally enforced gender norms are ridiculous, and the policing of gender expression/identity is oppressive and often violent. This critical and necessary discussion about gender has sparked a great deal of interest in—and, in some quarters, generated a lot of sympathy for—people who aren't just talking about gender but struggling with it, doing something about it, and redefining it. But "interest in" and "sympathy for" have a way of attracting poseurs and attention-seekers. That's nothing new. Pay sympathetic attention to a plate of tater tots long enough, and it'll attract poseurs and attention-seekers, too. But since it's (almost always) impossible to tell the attention-seeking poseurs from the actual items, LR, your best course of action when someone declares themselves to be gender-neutral—or bigender or pangender or etceteragender—is to smile, nod, inquire about pronoun preferences, make a mental note not to use pronouns around that person (easier than committing multiple sets to memory), and then change the genderfucking subject.

I recently "friended" someone online whose bio mentions that their preferred pronoun is "their." They are not a transgender person. I've been told that they are "genderfluid," but it is commonly understood in our friend group that they are female. Questions: (1) If you're genderfluid, are you suddenly not male or female? Does anyone really need to say that they're genderfluid? Aren't we all a bit fluid where gender is concerned? (2) Does someone who is cisgender take away from the "trans experience" by taking on pronouns like "they/their" or "ze/zir," or are they being helpful by normalizing these pronouns? (3) Am I a jerk for asking these questions? I want to be sensitive to gender issues, but I'm worried that I can't keep up.

Observant One Prefers She

1. A genderfluid person is someone "whose gender identity shifts," says the *Washington Post*. Wikipedia defines genderfluidity like this: "Moving between genders or with a fluctuating gender identity." An actual genderfluid person—Astrophy—put it this way in a post at Jezebel: "I am genderfluid, though I was assigned female at birth... What does this mean? For me, it means that sometimes I am a woman, sometimes I am a man, and sometimes I am androgynous. I do not mean that sometimes I *feel manly*; in every internal sense, I am a man in those moments." So someone who is genderfluid isn't a mélange of stereotypically male and female traits, OOPS, but someone who is man sometimes and a woman at other times. 2. Helpful, I suppose, but nevertheless exhausting, potentially attention-whoring, and doubtless contributing to the extinction of pronouns altogether. 3. There's being sensitive to gender issues, and then there's being so sensitive to gender issues that you're practically allergic. But rest assured: You are not a jerk, OOPS, as there are so many freshly minted gender identities and pronouns sloshing around out there that no one can keep up.

My intelligent, lovely, in-all-ways-phenomenal 18-year-old daughter just came out to me: as asexual! I am struggling with my reaction to this. If she had said she was a lesbian, I would have been fine with it, except for all that discrimination and stuff. I will always support her, but I can't help but think that (1) something bad happened to her that (despite my near-helicopter parenting) I don't know about, and/or (2) she'll miss out! Is asexuality really a thing? Can it be some sort of opt-out-of-this-sex-stuff-until-later thing? 'Cause that I get.

Parenting Asexual Undergrad Since Evening

Asexuality is a real thing, PAUSE, and your daughter could be an intelligent and phenomenal example. That said... for some, asexuality has functioned as an opt-out-of-this-sex-stuff-until-later thing. But just as some gay men identifying as bisexual before coming out as gay doesn't mean bisexuality is a phase (or nonexistent), the fact that some people identify as asexual before ultimately coming out as—here we go—heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, graysexual, demisexual, autosexual, antisexual, hyposexual, etc., etc., etc. isn't proof that asexuality isn't a real thing. Keep listening to your daughter, PAUSE, and learn more about asexuality at the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (asexuality.org).

I love your column, Dan, but I wanted to clear something up. Recently someone wrote to you that they—or their spouse—wanted to have a threesome, but only if it happened "naturally." You said that was impossible: "Three-ways don't happen that way," you said. But I'm proof that they do. I am a female in my mid-20s, and I've been openly bi since I was 12. I'm not particularly fond of threesomes, but I go with the flow. I've already had three happen naturally, and one "almost" that I stopped due to "timing issues." (Three MFF and one FFF.) My advice: If you can get a three-way massage or a game of strip-anything going, you're in for the gold. Alcohol really helps, too.

Girl Gone There

Perhaps I should've said that threesomes rarely happen naturally, GGT, while emphasizing that individual results may vary. But a relationship is far likelier to survive an "unnatural" threesome—one that has been planned in advance—than it is to survive a spontaneous threesome. Unsexy negotiations about limits and boundaries, hashing out what is and is not okay, and discussions about STIs and birth control are nearly impossible to have as your clothes are coming off. So threesomes that people drink, massage, or strip-poker their way into are likelier to result in the kind of hurt feelings that lead to breakups and make all threesomes, spontaneous or planned, look dangerous and risky.

On the Lovecast, the science is in on teen sexting: listen at savagelovecast.com.

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