What does it mean to be known?
What does it mean to be unknown?
What does it mean to be invisible? or Erased? or Disappeared?

We all want to be known. It’s how we were made; real relationship is like fresh air and pure water for us. It’s where we are most alive. Genuine, enriching relationships are held aloft by vulnerability and trust, self-giving and trustworthiness, dignity and truth. We seek the ultimate good of the other person, believing that they will do the same, in a delicate dance of sacrificial love.

We know from Psalms 139 v 16-19 what joy there is in being known.

13 For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

Despite these assuring words from The Psalms, parts of God’s diverse creation remain unknown, sometimes never known, sometimes known and erased or disappeared. Some examples of silencing follow

Internationally:
A recent report from Chechnya that over 100 gay men had been detained and at least 3 murdered. When asked for a comment, a spokesman for the Chechen government, Alvi Karimov, told the Russian news agency Interfax that the published story was "an absolute lie." But Karimov's fuller explanation underlined the deeply conservative and intolerant views of the republic's leadership. "You can't detain and harass someone who doesn't exist in the republic," he said.

Locally from Washington state:
An article about a newly forming chapter of PFLAG was featured on the front page of a small weekly newspaper. One reader objected saying: This subject is very controversial and politically provocative...I am not a bigot; I respect and care for everyone, but believe it would have been much better for the paper and readers to have put a condensed version of this article on inside pages, considering your readership.

In the issue of Kindred Connection are stories of being known, becoming known and knowing. May your heart be blessed by these stories.
By Ashley Dienst Philipson, Tacoma First UMC, Tacoma, WA

I am 12 (or 13, or 15--this happened too many times to pick one). I am standing in the bathroom of my parents' house, hands pressed flat against the counter to keep from scraping them over my skin, not looking at myself in the mirror. It feels as if something made of scales and claws is rooting around under my skin, trying to dig its way out. I think I may be losing my mind, but I have no way to explain to them what's happening to me because I don't know myself. I peel my hands off the counter and walk out of the room, still avoiding the mirror, and get on with the day without trying to take my own body apart to make the pain stop. I think, I have to think, that knowing how much my parents and my sister love me is part of how I do that.

I am 25 and sitting on the couch in my own home, holding my wife’s hand while I start to explain to my parents that I am and have always been transgender. I am as frightened as I have ever been in my life, an unreasoning and piercing terror that makes my chest feel flash-frozen. What keeps me talking is knowing that these two people have loved me as unconditionally as they've known how for twenty-five years. Even if the gnawing fear that maybe this one thing will be unbridgeable is trying to take me apart, I am going to be seen by them. I hope that they will put in the work needed to understand it. Even if they don't, I have my wife's hand in mine telling me that I will not be alone. It's not an easy or natural conversation, and they go away thoughtful, but nothing is broken. When my mother calls a few days later, it's to ask what books she ought to read.

I'm exactly 30 years old, at dinner with my family, celebrating another birthday and that I have survived (when you're transgender, these moments matter, because you remember all the men and women like you who didn't). My mother is handing me a box with an envelope and jewelry inside, jewelry from both my grandmothers, and she calls me her daughter when she does it. So does my father. As we leave the restaurant, the waitress, who's served us before and learned my pronouns, says we seem like a happy family. “We are,” I tell her. What I don't tell her is that on the worst days, it's that happiness and the care that goes with it that helps keep me above ground.

My husband and I are retired and share our home with two of our four children: the oldest two are in San Francisco and Paris, not bad places to visit. Being avid sailors and scuba divers, we are happy on or in water.

My journey into the reconciling life started when our son, Angel came out as transgender (female to male) 4 years ago at age 14. We really had no clue what it meant to be transgender so I did what I always do when one of my children needs help. I researched and sought out people that could help. My goal was to make sure that Angel was loved and supported in all aspects of his life including school, church, family, and friends. His school and his friends and family have supported him 100%. We switched churches to join a United Methodist Church with a Reconciling Sunday School class, not knowing that the denomination is homophobic. By the time we found out, we were in love with the local church.

Since Angel came out, I have spent the majority of my time advocating for equal rights and acceptance of transgender individuals. I lead our church through a study to become a fully reconciling UMC congregation. I am active in PFLAG, attend conferences for transgender youth and started a support group for transgender adults. The most important thing I have learned in the past 4 years is that when a person is accepted, loved, and supported unconditionally for who they are they can become who they are meant to be.
Growing up as a PK, I clocked a lot of hours at church. I became skilled at sussing out the best covered dish. I memorized bible verses for candy prizes. I even joined the old ladies' quilting group in middle school (that was not really what the cool kids were doing at the time). Over the years I heard a lot of opinions voiced, concerns raised, and worries shared on a variety of topics.

Even within the microcosm of the church with its united belief system, it was clear to me early on that there was a spectrum of beliefs on theological and social issues amongst the parishioners. While every church service and Sunday school lesson did not revolve around the "sin" of homosexuality, I witnessed enough derisive comments and opinions about homosexuality from the congregation to get the idea it wasn't acceptable. At best I witnessed silence on the topic implying that there was nothing nice to say and so we would say nothing at all.

My experience coming to terms with my sexuality and coming out would have been so much easier if the United Methodist Church had forthrightly told me that all are welcome in the church, and that our whole selves are welcome in the church. It would have been easier if people did not use euphemisms like "friend" and "roommate" for loving and caring partners, and if we did not have to keep quiet about meaningful parts of our lives.

I waited to come out to my family until I felt self-sustaining enough to risk their possible rejection. I understood that the church's stance on the issue was clear, and my parents had spent their entire lives devoted to these teachings. Rejection seemed to me to be a very real possibility. While they accepted me right away, it was challenging for them to support my partner and me publicly at first, because my dad felt a sense of duty to his congregation (one that took a conservative stance on the topic). What an awful position for him to be in, torn between accepting and advocating for his own child or upholding the governing rules of the church and the community that he was called upon to serve. What an awful position for me to be in, asking him to choose.

Those voices in the church that say hateful or hurtful things about gay people are officially condoned and protected by the UMC's church doctrine, which does not celebrate and welcome individuals to be part of the church with their whole selves and their partners. Even if individuals claim to have no problems with gay people, and might never say hateful or hurtful things, the official stance is that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. I feel sorry for other young folks going to church and hearing the mixed messages...wondering if they will be accepted.
I am a straight, white woman. My sister is a lesbian. We grew up in a culturally and ethnically diverse neighborhood in San Diego. We were the minority ethnicity in our neighborhood and schools. My parents explained to us later in life that they consciously chose that experience for us.

We grew up in the Methodist church, attending Sunday school, Easter camp, Youth Group and my parents’ church choir performances. I grew up with Christian beliefs, practiced Christian rituals and celebrated Christian holidays. My parents raised us to treat others as we would want to be treated: with compassion, respect, empathy and love. If we had a problem with someone, it could not be about physical appearance, skin color, disability, or for being different than ourselves. We were not allowed to participate in bullying or to behave with malicious intent. We were not allowed to be violent. We were encouraged to resolve a conflict in the most peaceful way possible.

In high school, I had a very close friend who was gay and out, but only at school. Although obviously gay to everyone at school, being gay was not ok in his family. It was a sin. And there would be consequences for being gay if he was ever "found out". My friend's goal and plan was to graduate high school and to attend college away from home so that he could be himself. He just needed to keep his sexual orientation a secret from his family and other family members until he moved away for college.

My sister came out to me in my last semester of high school. I was shocked. Yes, she was an athlete and dressed and acted less feminine than other female students at our school. Yes, she never had a boyfriend. Yes, she had a best friend, also an athlete, and they spent a lot of time together.

But so did I. I played sports. I never dated anybody. I spent a lot of time with girl friends. I wasn't gay.

My sister cried when she told me. She told my parents and my gay friend before she told me. She didn't know how I would react, if I would accept her. I was angry, not because she told me she was gay. I was angry because she told my parents and my friend before she told me. Isn't the sibling supposed to be safer to tell than parents? And didn't she know me well enough to trust that I would accept her no matter what? She said it was the hardest thing she's ever had to do. She told my parents and they reacted by telling immediately her that they loved her, no matter what.

Asking my parents later about their first thoughts and feelings, they admitted to having some concerns for her future, having questions, and also being shocked. But they also knew that all of things were their issues and not hers and those things could be worked through. The most important thing was to let my sister know that their love for her was not conditional on being straight. Their love was not an issue that had to be worked on.

I was a few months away from graduating high school when my friend was found out by his mother. He called me in a panic because his mother was terribly angry, ready to kick him out of the house and send him to a conversion program through her Christian church. I immediately told me parents and asked for help. They invited my friend and his mother over to try and smooth things out. That night, my parents "came out" for the first time about my sister. They shared their experience as parents and as Christians. They shared their positive thoughts and feelings about my friend as a person, student. They offered their support to my friend's mother in any way they could. That night, she decided she wouldn't kick her son out. She decided she would not send her son to a program. She didn't accept his sexual orientation yet, but she didn't need to in that moment. She had work to do.

In the years since, my parents have shared their experience of being parents of a lesbian child with those they feel would benefit from their story. They have been vocal and have led by example. They were led by their hearts and educated themselves so that they could educate others. They advocated for those who are historically underrepresented or discriminated against. They joined others to support the fight for LGBTQ* rights and they initiated groups to support the fight. They did all of this without being asked by their children. They just knew it was the right thing to do. They did so with their Christian hearts and the faith that we are all better by acting with love than with hate.

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Today, I am a licensed psycho-therapist and I practice with the strong belief that healing begins with sharing with others. Healing begins with supporting each other with love, compassion and empathy. Human beings are biologically social beings. We NEED each other, not only to survive, but to thrive. We accomplish things and are stronger when we do them together. This is what such groups and organizations like the Reconciling Ministries Network and Parents Reconciling Ministries do. They heal. They connect. They support. They love.

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I'm a 36 year old mother of twins and devoted wife. I'm a successful Human Resources professional working for arguably the best hotelier in the world. I'm a former collegiate athlete. I am a daughter and a sister. I am a Christian. I am gay.

I "came out" as gay to my parents when I was just 19 years old. At the time, I was a sophomore in college and decided to seize on an opportunity to tell my parents while they were visiting me for a weekend. I was raised in a nurturing home that encouraged inclusion and open mindedness. I had the burning urge to share my "secret" because I had always been honest with my parents, even when my actions were cause for (temporary) disappointment. I never feared them rejecting me. The only thing I worried about by coming out as gay was that THEY would worry about ME...my safety, if others would show kindness or hatred towards me, my future employment opportunities, and I'm sure the list goes on. So when I shared the news, I was visually emotional and found it hard to utter the words "I'm gay". My parents simply responded just as all parents should, "We love you." In that moment, I was reminded that in our home, race, gender, and sexual orientation didn't matter. All that mattered was that I was happy...and I was. I had my family's support.

Year's later, I would marry my high school sweetheart and give birth to our twins, Quinn and Carter. Our children were baptized in the church in which I was raised and where my parents are still active members. I couldn't be more proud of their advocacy of the LGBT community; my family's community. Christianity isn't about how well you recite the stories in the Bible, it's about how one lives life. I strive to be the parents to my children that my mom and dad were to me.

That night, my parents "came out" for the first time

New PRN Board Members—Eric and Rexanna

Eric Swanson, a retired civil engineer from San Diego and Rexanna, a retired teacher, have been married for 41 years and both are life-long members of the United Methodist Church, worshipping the last 40 years to at First United Methodist Church - Chula Vista, CA. They have two wonderful daughters, Hilary Swanson (San Francisco) and Courtney Prescott (Las Vegas), a wonderful daughter in law, Nikki Prescott, and terrific 3 year old twins, Quinn and Carter Prescott.

Eric was fortunate to grow up in a moderately liberal family in Phoenix, Arizona. Both parents were both Democrats and strongly supported the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in the mid-60's, as did Rexanna's parents from Texas. Rexanna and Eric specifically purchased a home in San Diego in a diverse ethnic neighborhood because they wanted their daughters to grow up with and experience neighbors and friends with a wide variety of cultural influences.

Their older daughter, Courtney, "came out" 18 years ago when she was 19. Although it was a "bit of news" to her parents, this new information did not alter or diminish their love for her. She married her true love, Nikki, in 2007, in a ceremony where they could not have a United Methodist pastor preside So they were blessed to have his layperson wife "officiate". Courtney and Nikki became officially married the next year in Monterey, Ca, prior to the awful Proposition 8 vote in California that November. The family is blessed with grandchildren, twins (boy and girl) by virtue of Courtney's pregnancy (via donor sperm).

Rexanna and Eric find the 3 anti-gay sentences in the UMC Book of Discipline to be repugnant and antithetical to Jesus' direction to be his disciples by loving God and loving everyone. They love the work of the Reconciling Ministries Network and the Parents Reconciling Network and are honored and blessed to be associated with both!
As a young gay boy growing up in Virginia, I learned to be quiet.

I learned that the very act of speaking could prompt a classmate to make fun of my voice. I learned that I wasn’t supposed to tell people I was interested in things like gardening, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or gymnastics. I learned to sit in silence while a chemistry teacher told us that there were no gay couples in nature. I learned to watch from the sidelines while people like my brother spoke up and challenged the school board when they blocked PFLAG and other queer-affirming websites from school computers.

I was quiet because I was afraid of the rejection and harassment that out people like my brother faced on a daily basis. I was quiet because I believed that gay people could not become doctors, have families—have happiness. I was quiet because I believed what the world around me was saying that I was wrong, defective, disgusting. I was quiet because I believed that I should not make others uncomfortable by being myself.

Then in college, I visited my first queer-affirming spaces and was astounded to find a sense of community, acceptance, and relief that I had never imagined existed. I met a man who loved me for me and we began to build a beautiful life together. Still, I was quiet. Other than in gay spaces and pride events, we did not hold hands, hug, or kiss because we knew that people like us might be harassed, beaten, or killed for showing our love in public.

In medical school, I began to discover my voice when I advocated for inclusion of LGBTQ* health issues in the curriculum. I had the support of some of my best friends and incredible mentors, but still I faced blatant bullying and intimidation by a dean who did not believe there was any value in dedicating time to “that population.”

Four years ago, I chose to train in psychiatry so that I could specialize in LGBTQ* mental health. My experiences so far have allowed me to witness impossible stories of resilience. At the same time, through this work I have witnessed so much pain and trauma inflicted upon people, solely because of who they are and who they love, that there are days when it is simply unbearable.

Every single queer person suffers on a daily basis from living in a world that largely does not accept us and often threatens our safety. Silence is acceptance, and we need our allies—in our schools, churches, families, and jobs—to speak up for and with us.
When I was born a doctor handed me to my mom and said "It’s a girl!" When I was 14, I handed myself to my mom and said "Just kidding". My name is Angel Chasco and I’m a bisexual transman, as well as a member of the United Methodist Church.

I am an exceptionally lucky transgender person. I have a supportive family, school, group of friends, and church group. I have access to hormones to transition. I recently went through surgery to remove my breasts. I live in the New Jersey, debatably, the most accommodating state for transgender people.

And yet, whenever I go out in a public place, I am extremely conscious of myself: will anybody know? If they do, will they do anything? And now, in certain states I have to worry about being allowed to use a bathroom without incident.

In spite of all of this, I feel that I am a fairly stereotypical teenage boy. I play videogames as much as I can, my room is a mess, and I consider grunting to be a form of communication.

That being said, this would not be true if I didn’t receive the support that I do. Many people look to their family and friends, as I did. Instinctively, I looked to my faith as well. However, I did have my doubts about the church. I figured that if everybody was saying God hates gay people, probably God hates transgender people too.

I believed that I couldn’t be a Christian anymore. If God didn’t love me, why should I love God? I was angry that God had been making people for so long and still managed to mess me up, as I saw it.

However, my mom looked for an accepting church, which she found in the United Methodist Church of Red Bank. All I knew was that there was a rainbow on the sign and nobody had a hateful thing to say. And that was more than I expected.

While we are steadily moving toward acceptance of the lesbian and gay members of our church, at times it seems that the bisexual and transgender members will be left behind. I worry that accepting one portion of the LGBTQ* community will leave other portions out of the picture. Or worse, new writing in the Book of Discipline will be added that says transgender people are incompatible with Christian teachings. I worry that we will lose sight of what must be done in order to continue to accept our brothers, sisters, and siblings in Christ. So I will end with this, with guidance from Romans chapter 8, verse 38 to 39 (above), don’t let the church get in the way of that love.

Angel Chasco, 18, lives in New Jersey and attends Communications High School where he is the Editor in Chief of the school’s literary magazine. He came out as transgender when he was 14 years old. He attends the United Methodist Church of Red Bank and is president of the God Squad (high school youth group). Chasco will be attending Westphal College of Media Arts & Design at Drexel University in the fall, where he will be majoring in Game Design and Production.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
Parents Reconciling Network (PRN) Board Members

The following members of the PRN board direct the activities of the PRN, an extension ministry of Reconciling Ministries Network. If you would like to contribute to this work, please contact Faith Geer or Carol Waymack.

Email addresses for steering committee members are included. We encourage parents or family members to contact us by email if would like to connect with us for discussing the issues surrounding parenting LGBTQ* children.

Steering Committee Members:
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Parents Reconciling Network unconditionally walks with the parents and families of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities until all are fully accepted in their families, in their churches, and in society by advocating for acceptance, providing education, and promoting welcoming communities of faith.

(search on Facebook for Parents Reconciling Network)