

The Colours of Life: A Purple Border
A Reflection on *Transamerica*
The first in the five-part Lenten series – Reel Theology
by Robert Oliphant at Eglinton St. George’s United Church
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Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25

When I met him, his name was Ray. We studied theology together. Ray was an American bush pilot, most recently having lived in the Alaskan panhandle. He and his wife decided to study theology together, not with the intention of ordination, but rather to become a more informed and, hopefully, faithful Christian. He came with questions about life and faith and always brought an interesting perspective to issues at hand.

Ray was at times socially awkward, a little gangly, quiet and fairly introverted, but had an amazing sense of humour. He was both sensible and sensitive, with eyes and ears open to those on the margins of the class. I can never remember him saying a hurtful or derogatory statement about anyone, and in seminary there are a lot of targets.

In second year, the students’ association held a Halloween party. It was a “dress-up” affair. There is just about no one who dislikes the thought of having to come up with a costume idea more than I do. But, bowing to peer pressure, I did throw something together and remember spending most of the evening feeling highly self-conscious, eager to get home and put my usual clothes on. Ray, on the other hand, surprised us all. He came dressed as a woman. He and his wife had spent many hours putting together his costume, and, frankly, looked stunning. But what caught a few of us more than how he looked was how he acted. Gone was the nervousness and social awkwardness. His hands moved fluidly, and his laugh was natural. His usually tight shoulders were relaxed and he moved through the room with ease. It wasn’t just with hindsight that we noticed it. It was striking enough for a couple of us to chat about it over the next few days.

That Halloween party was the beginning of a journey for Ray that we, some of his closest friends at the time, would only learn the significance of several years later. While completely heterosexual, or at least, attracted to women, Ray began to increasingly dress as a woman. He told a few of us about this, and we understood him to be a transvestite, a man, often heterosexual, who enjoys dressing in women’s clothing. We had always thought him a bit quirky and, proud of the liberal theological education we were getting, found it easy to accept this latest quirk.

But it wasn’t just a quirk. Seminary came to an end and we moved on, Ray returning to flying. What we had thought to be a quirk, turned out to be the actualisation of whom Ray felt he truly was. His sexual orientation was fixed; he was attracted to women, but his gender was not so fixed. He more and more had to come to terms with the fact that, while biologically male, he was not, and never had been, emotionally, or in any other way, male. He was not, as we had first thought, a transvestite, a man who likes to dress in women’s clothing (also called a cross-dresser). He was a transsexual, a male-to-female person whose gender was more female than his biological make-up would suggest. He was, as most people say today, a transgendered person, a transsexual woman.

I would later find out that he entered a five-year program to become female. She took on the name Kay, had electrolysis, facial feminisation surgery, years of hormone therapy, and began to socialize, to live as

a woman in society. The psychiatrists tested her to ascertain the validity of her claim. In the end, she moved from being a pre-operative transsexual, to a post-operative, having her final surgery in Montreal. She chose Montreal because of the fine medical care there, and the significant reduction in the cost for her surgery.

About a year after this I reconnected with Ray, only to find out for the first time, that she was Kay. I was intellectually intrigued with the idea, and, planning on being on the west coast, made arrangements to spend some time with her and her wife. They were still married. In fact, they were probably the first fully legally married female couple in the United States. While I was intellectually prepared for the meeting, it turns out that I was not emotionally prepared. At her suggestion, Kay and I met in a public place with our spouses. Apparently, I didn't shut up for about an hour, nervously talking, filling in gaps, trying to cover my awkwardness. After some time, Kay said to me, "You haven't mentioned how I have changed since we last saw each other." I nervously acknowledged that, indeed, I had not. She then went on to say, "Well, you could at least notice that I've changed my hairstyle." That broke the ice and we were able to carry on a more normal conversation.

I had thought myself urbane, liberal, open and inclusive. I discovered, in fact, that I had borders on my inclusivity. I had put boundaries around my openness. I had limits to my liberality. Over some time, my friendship with Kay pushed me through, over, or across those borders so that I eventually saw that what was in front of me was not a male-to female transgendered person, not a Transsexual Woman, simply a person, part of God's creation, someone scared by exclusion, eternally hopeful of inclusion, and always, always, hoping that she would be seen for who she was and is.

Perhaps this is why I felt some personal connection to Duncan Tucker's little independent film *Transamerica*, starring the amazing Felicity Huffman. That is, perhaps, the first reason why I felt it merited inclusion in this year's Reel Theology series. It is a story that pushes at the borders of what we feel comfortable with. It takes us on a journey, calling us to see people as they want to be seen, not as we want to see them.

Transamerica tells the story of Bree, a fairly conservative, well-educated pre-op transsexual woman who is living in stealth - that is code for living as a woman - passing as a G.G. (genetic girl) saving money for her final gender reassignment surgery. She lives in Los Angeles alone - in every sense of that word, working at two marginal jobs. Early on we see that her only really intimate relationship is with her therapist.

She is counting down the days to her surgery when she receives a phone call from Toby, a jailed teenage runaway looking for his father. His story begins to ring true for her and she has to come to terms with the fact that a fleeting heterosexual encounter in college, during her life as Stanley some seventeen years ago, resulted in a son. This is a complication that she does not want to deal with, but her therapist insists that she must confront her past, and withholds legal permission for Bree's final operation until she has met the boy. The boy, by the way, is superbly played by a young Canadian actor from Woodstock, Ontario, Kevin Zegers.

So Bree grudgingly dips into her precious operation fund and flies to New York to bail Toby out of jail. This 17 year old is a hustler in every sense of the word. He has been arrested for stealing a frog and for possessing illegal drugs. He has a long rap sheet, mostly for his activity as a prostitute. Released to her without explanation, Toby assumes from Bree's conservative appearance (mostly 1970's fashions, often

in purple, sometimes in pink) that she is a Christian missionary whose goal is to reform him and bring him to Jesus. Bree decides that that story is better than the possibility of fatherhood – or motherhood – and, after a somewhat convoluted plot line, agrees to buy an old car and take him to Los Angeles – where she can continue with her surgical plan and he can attempt to find Stanley, his father. Her real plan, after learning that his mother is dead however, is to get him back to his stepfather, from whom he had run away.

Thus begins the road trip. This is the second reason that I chose this film to be a part of the series and to kick it off. I love to start the Lenten season with a Road Movie, reminding us that Lent is a season of journey, of movement, of transformation. This journey goes from the northeastern to the southwestern United States, but more than that it takes two characters on a journey of transformation. The success of a good Road Movie depends almost solely on the characters making the trip. It is all about the chemistry between them, the challenges they face and the changes that happen in and to them. The situations can be familiar, if not downright cliché, but, if the characters have magic between them, we find ourselves on the journey with them.

And the characters work. Huffman, nominated for an Academy award for Best Actress in a leading role (which I think she should win, though is in tough competition with Reese Witherspoon) portrays Bree as a vulnerable, fiercely independent and charming character, rather than an over-the-top caricature that could have easily ruined the movie. Kevin Zegers plays Toby as street-wise, but also with just the right amount of youthful innocence. We want to go on this trip with these two.

Of course, *Transamerica* has all the common elements of a Road Movie: the breakthroughs and setbacks, the fights and the detours involving the characters' pasts, misplaced trust, the lost car and money, sleeping outdoors, a little nudity, a bit of sex, even a *Some Like it Hot* moment between Bree and a love-struck native American rancher played by Canadian-born Graham Greene, who reminds us of the help and kindness of strangers.

But it is way more than a Road Movie, mostly because of the highly believable performance of Felicity Huffman. She makes us smile, laugh and finally cheer for her – and never once does she ask us to feel sorry for her. Hers is not a pity party. She has come through a lifetime of pain and difficulty and never wants to give up on the possibility of happiness. A glimpse of that painful past is revealed in an en route stop at her parents. Roger Ebert refers to them as her “vulgarian parents.” Her mother’s most telling line is “We love you, but we don’t respect you.” This visit leads to an increasing solidarity between Bree and Toby, whose own childhood abuse has already been revealed.

We recognize that both these characters are on their way home, but home is not where we might have thought it to be or wanted to put it. Their childhood homes are places of mistrust and fear. The homes that they are avoiding are not home to them at all. Their past can’t be avoided, but it need not be embraced. They are travelling to a new home, becoming new people, being transformed as they make their way there.

The road home, though, isn’t easy. We, as Christians, like to think that we offer a way there, an easier route, a belonging. Well, the third reason that I chose to highlight this film in church at the start of Lent is because of comments that I read from its writer-director, Duncan Tucker. The film was shot on location across the United States, trans-America, which meant filming in both liberal and conservative communities. As is often the case, this film production used local churches as holding areas near sets for

extras and for meals. (We allow our church to be used that way as often as we can, enjoying the revenue it provides.) Tucker, however, felt the need to give extra instructions to his cast and crew when they were in churches, telling them that if anyone asked the film was “about a woman and her son going on a cross-country road trip.” Not exactly a lie, but not the whole truth.

It got me to thinking that if churches are not the place where this filmmaker could honestly and openly talk about this film then something is wrong with these churches, not this film. The church, the community that tells God’s story, that tells the story of God’s beloved son, chosen to welcome and to include the outcast, and the marginalized, has got to be the place that not only welcomes the Brees of our world, but their stories too. Our churches need to wrestle with what constitutes borders for us and struggle with crossing over those borders so that all may find home here.

Once we’ve welcomed their stories, once we have crossed the purple border, we may find that their stories are also our stories. While specifically about the experience of a transgendered woman, *Transamerica* is more than that. Every single human being has had experiences at least in some way similar to those of Bree: being self-conscious to an excruciating level, not fitting in, wishing people could see you as you really are, having to hide your true self from those you love. True, transgendered people experience this at an intense level, but it is still a truth of the human soul. Why else would the Psalmist have written: “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me”? (*Psalm 25*) And why would we continue to recite that even this morning if it did not resonate with at least some of us at least some of the time? We are all in this game called life together. All of us are searching for true and authentic home. And the church is the place where home is meant to be found.

When God makes covenant it is not with some, it is with *all* flesh. In our Genesis reading this morning, this fact is repeated five times. And the rainbow is the sign that reminds us of the covenant between God and all flesh that is on the earth (Genesis 9:17) all flesh. That is you and I. It is them and it is us. All flesh. All.

What lies at the end of this road trip could be new life. That new life may start with surgery. It may start with education, with opportunity, but we know that these will never be enough. Just completing their plans are not enough for their rebirth. They won’t be fully restored, renewed, reborn until they are caught by grace, and that grace will come from the experience of being loved, not in spite of who they are, but because of it. That grace will be experienced when *we* are willing to reach out, through, over or across the borders that we naturally find in our lives and see others for the grace that is in them. That is grace. And that, my friends, is what home is all about.