



Spirit Inspired
Worship



Potty Talk
August 23, 2023
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I just came back from British Columbia, Canada on my annual sisters' trip. Instead of renting a car, we paid for day tours: a hop-on/hop-off bus around Vancouver and a van and ferry to Victoria. We walked and shopped and ate. But, you get to an age where you use the bathroom even if you don't need to just because you're not sure when you'll find another. My motto these days is the best restroom is the closest restroom. Or, as my Canadian friends call it, a "washroom." (They're right: I did more washing than resting in public toilets.)

At one large public market, we sat outside at picnic tables to enjoy the live music and bustle of shoppers. I was pleased to see the washroom sign just down the way. While my eldest sister watched our belongings, my middle sister and I made our way to the washroom. A large sign announced that this was an all-gender restroom. The first large room had a dozen sinks. Coming off it were two hallways of stalls with long doors. With no line, I was in and out in a jiffy. I did my business and returned to the table, switching with my eldest sister who also needed the facilities. "They're all-gender restrooms," I advised. "Oh," she said, "I don't know if I can do that." "It's okay," I replied, "No one will be in the stall with you."

She, too, returned having accomplished what she set out to do. The novelty of the setup had largely passed, except for one observation by sister. On her trip to the washroom, there was a line. She noticed that women seemed to grimace when the next available stall was vacated by a man. She attributed that to the stereotype (reputation?) that men tend to leave the bathroom smellier or dirtier than women. Again, that's just a stereotype (reputation?).

My preference is not to use public restrooms, but when the best restroom is the closest restroom, I'm not too picky. Over the years, I've been grateful for access to the campground outhouse buzzing with flies, the construction site port-a-potty, and the "employees only" toilet back in a dark storeroom. This public restroom was pretty nice in comparison. Clean, soap in the dispensers, well-lit. And, it was available to anyone, including people for whom the closest bathroom might never be the "right" bathroom.

I grew up hearing warnings of creepy peeping-Tom's who would lurk in women's bathrooms to catch a peek while I used the potty. I never saw one, but it's also the case that their criminal behavior was not deterred by the gender-exclusive sign on the restroom door. Better doors on the stalls – like those in Vancouver – eliminates access for this criminal problem, without turning people away who actually need the toilet.

In Idaho, where I'm currently living, a civil rights lawsuit has been filed over a law passed by the legislature imposing gender restrictions to toilets and locker rooms in schools. I don't know how it will end. There would be a cost, for sure, to retrofitting school toilets and locker rooms for increased privacy, just as there was a necessary cost to retrofit them to be accessible by wheelchairs. I acknowledge there's also a difference between using a toilet in a stall and totally undressing in the locker room (which has never felt comfortable to me even in a same-gender context).

If we're clear about what we value (privacy, access to toilets), we should be able to find a solution. If we get distracted by labels and stereotypes and assumptions, it's going to be a lot harder.