

Rite of Transition



Esther "Elle" Loewen



I. WELCOME & INVITATION

Mandy Cordero

A rite is a ritual of transformation; a communal exercise designed to change us, and also to bless and integrate changes that have already taken place.

While there are precious few traditional or religious ceremonies marking the journey of transgender people, every spiritual tradition has validated many other transformations with rituals not unlike this one. Today we respectfully borrow elements from Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Indigenous American spirituality, the LGBTQ community, and Elle's family to shape these moments. We express our gratitude to these people, as well as to Paradox Church for hosting us.

This Rite of Transition is a participation in and an initiation into the revolutionary work of the Divine Spirit in the world. This Spirit cannot be controlled; rather, she subverts all attempts at domination, individually and systemically. Jesus taught that this aspect of God's essence blows among us like wind, changing us as she wishes, and ultimately making all things new. Her mothering voice is the one that brought us into existence. And it is their surprising creativity that drives us to our callings on the other side of wilderness.

The ritual we participate in today is an affirmation of what is already true about Esther's identity: she is

enough exactly as she is, loved, holy, beautiful, called, and brave. This ceremony is also an invitation, not only to continue participating in her life as it continues to unfold, but to join the ineffable power of the universe as it leans toward grace and peace.

And so, as we begin this moment of what we hope will become transcendent, we whisper a prayer to the One who cannot be defined:

We welcome you, Spirit of Life.

Kindle our hearts with the fire of your love.

Shine where you will, tearing down every evil thing

And renew the face of the earth.



II. THE ASH OF LOSS & GRIEF

Rose Benjamin (via video)

Part of the work of transition is grieving.

We all had a relationship with a person we called “Kristopher”; this person is still with us – and in many ways, even more-so than before. However, many hopes, assumptions, joys, and shared meaning will ultimately pass away because of her transition as Esther. It is good and important to name these losses and express the emotions that accompany them.

The Jewish tradition brings with it a rich heritage of lament. The Tanakh (or Hebrew Scripture) is filled with songs, stories, and poetry demonstrating the essential value of telling the truth about what has gone wrong. It also shows us how God is able to hear and hold the fullness of human experience. As a part of this ceremony, we want to follow in the footsteps of generations of spiritual travelers by acknowledging our grief.

Some of your laments may be singular to you, or even private—to remain unspoken. Others might be cultural, rooted in the patriarchal heteronormative gender roles we all have experienced and suffered under. There are some here for whom the church or religious worldviews have created loss associated with Esther’s transition

(or with the LGBTQ experience at large). And of course, some of us have lost relationships that we once cherished related to this journey.

All change brings with it some form of loss – but it need not always be violent or traumatic. As we name our pain, express the sadness, anger, and fear that accompany them, we set ourselves up to receive the beauty that can grow in the barren fields of loss.

When you are ready, we invite you to come forward with the vial of ASH you received at the door. As you empty it in the basin, give voice to your losses in a sentence or two, or simply as a silent prayer.



III. THE TRANSGENDER JOURNEY

Esther “Elle” Elizabeth Loewen

The candidate will elaborate on the spiritual nature of her transition, the ways in which God has called to this path, and the wilderness from which she is emerging.



IV. THE GLITTER OF AFFIRMATION

Andrea Farley (via video)

Transition is ultimately rooted in hope. While many of us grieve what has passed, there is also joy in what is to come. Much of American culture has not yet awakened to the reality (and moreover the beauty) of the transgender experience. Thus, it is easy to conclude that affirming or blessing trans people is anathema. This is especially true for those of us who have histories with the Christian church.

As Esther has testified, her process of transition is first and foremost spiritual; a calling forward into the paradoxical splendor of providence. She has experienced the non-dual reality that Jesus highlights in the famous Beatitude dialogue from the Gospel of Matthew in the Christian Scriptures.

“Blessed (or fortunate, or mature) are those in poverty, grieving, oppressed, and longing for justice,” he says. These sorts of ironic affirmations are not only descriptive of spiritual realities, they are political as well. Jesus was murdered in part for challenging the status quo with teachings like the Beatitudes. He was not the first prophet to be killed for affirming the wrong kinds of people – and he will not be the last.

Today, we invite you to follow in the footsteps of the radically inclusive prophets of our collective pasts: from all cultures, traditions, and religions. When you are ready, please come forward with the vial of glitter you received at the door. As you empty it into the basin with the ash and oil, give voice to your hopeful affirmation, and support of Esther and her family. Please do this in one or two words – or silently as a prayer.

This act may seem risky; it is worth the risk.



V. ANOINTING & RENAMING

Chris Oberg

MINISTER (to candidate):

By what name shall you be known?

MOM & DAD:

The name shall be: Esther "Elle" Elizabeth

ELLE:

My name shall be Esther "Elle" Elizabeth

MINISTER:

*Community, repeat after me: 'Your name shall be
Esther. Esther. Esther.'*

COMMUNITY:

'Your name shall be Esther. Esther. Esther...'

MINISTER (to candidate):

Bear this name as a reflection of your true self.

Share this name as a reflection of Mercy.

Offer this name as a reflection of Justice.

Ash for transformation and glitter for hope.

Bound together with the oil of God's anointing.

Creation itself bears witness.

You, my siblings, bear witness.

Christ bears witness.



VI. A QUEER COMMUNION

Mandy Cordero

Many religious traditions and cultures use rituals of food to mark spiritual transformation. From Judaism to Hinduism, Christianity to Islam, Buddhism to Folk Religions, and even American Secularism: almost all have commemorated significant changes by feasting, fasting, and or symbolic consumption.

Today as we close, you are invited to participate in a ritual “meal” of glitter cookies and juice. The ritual of Communion (or the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist), is traditionally used by Christians as an act of cleansing, commitment to God, and gratitude for grace. It is also sometimes employed as a signal of commitment at weddings, graduations, and baptisms. As we respectfully borrow this imagery today, you are invited to make a vow of fidelity to your communities (big or small), families (chosen or born), and divine source. If you choose to take part in this playful exercise, we invite you to consider committing yourself to the joyful work of queering in the world, and embracing the essence of God: love.

If you are comfortable participating, please make your way forward for a cookie and juice. After you return to your seat, please eat in your own time as you meditate, pray, and quietly make personal vows.



VII. CLOSING BLESSING

Elle Loewen

Prayer entitled, “Blown by God toward Newness”,
written by Walter Brueggemann and published in his
book *Prayers for a Privileged People*.

The news is that God’s wind is blowing.

*It may be a breeze that
cools and comforts.*

*It may be a gust that
summons you to notice.*

*It may be a storm that blows you where you
have never been before.*

*Whatever the wind is in your life,
pay attention to it..*

*and the blessing of God,
Parent, Child, and Spirit,
will abide with you always.*



ABOUT THE LEADERS

Mandy Cordero

Pastor, Paradox Church,
Redlands, California

Rose Benjamin

Elle's gender-therapist and mentor from Michigan

Andrea Farley

Pastor, Elle's former classmate, ministry colleague,
and friend from Spokane, Washington

Chris Oberg

Pastor, ministry colleague, and friend
from Corona, California

Andrew Silvestri

Musician & member of Paradox Church

Gregory Loewen

Musician & Esther's Dad



THE RITE CONTINUES

Thank you sincerely for making space in your life for this important gathering. Your presence brings with it validation, courage, and community that are nothing short of life-giving. Thank you.

Following immediately at the Loewen's home, please join us for an informal meal.

The Loewen family offer their sincerest thanks to Paradox Church of Redlands for providing their facility, technical support, and personnel to bring this to life.