

Ivan Coyote – Ted Talk

Why we need gender-neutral bathrooms

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There are a few things that we all need: fresh air, water, food, shelter, love ... and a safe place to pee. For trans people who don't fit neatly into the gender binary, public restrooms are a major source of anxiety and the place where they are most likely to be questioned or harassed. In this poetically rhythmic talk, Ivan Coyote grapples with complex and intensely personal issues of gender identity and highlights the need for gender-neutral bathrooms in all public places.

00:11 There are a few things that all of us need. We all need air to breathe. We need clean water to drink. We need food to eat. We need shelter and love. You know. Love is great, too. And we all need a safe place to pee.

00:32 (Laughter) Yeah?

00:34 As a trans person who doesn't fit neatly into the gender binary, if I could change the world tomorrow to make it easier for me to navigate, the very first thing I would do is blink and create single stall, gender-neutral bathrooms in all public places.

00:53 (Applause) Trans people and trans issues, they've been getting a lot of mainstream media attention lately. And this is a great and necessary thing, but most of that attention has been focused on a very few individuals, most of whom are kinda rich and pretty famous, and probably don't have to worry that much anymore about where they're going to pee in between classes at their community college, or where they're going to get changed into their gym strip at their public high school. Fame and money insulates these television star trans people from most of the everyday challenges that the rest of us have to tackle on a daily basis.

01:45 Public bathrooms. They've been a problem for me since as far back as I can remember, first when I was just a little baby tomboy and then later as a masculine-appearing, predominantly estrogen-based organism.

02:02 (Laughter)

02:03 Now, today as a trans person, public bathrooms and change rooms are where I am most likely to be questioned or harassed. I've often been verbally attacked behind their doors. I've been hauled out by security guards with my pants still halfway pulled up. I've been stared at, screamed at, whispered about, and one time I got smacked in the face by a little old lady's purse that from the looks of the shiner I took home that day I am pretty certain contained at least 70 dollars of rolled up small change and a large hard candy collection.

02:36 (Laughter)

02:39 And I know what some of you are thinking, and you're mostly right. I can and do just use the men's room most of the time these days. But that doesn't solve my change room dilemmas, does it? And I shouldn't have to use the men's room because I'm not a man. I'm a trans person.

03:07 And now we've got these fearmongering politicians that keep trying to pass these bathroom bills. Have you heard about these? They try to legislate to try and force people like myself to use the bathroom that they deem most appropriate according to the gender I was assigned at birth. And if these politicians ever get their way, in Arizona or California or Florida or just last week in Houston, Texas, or Ottawa, well then, using the men's room will not be a legal option for me either.

03:42 And every time one of these politicians brings one of these bills to the table, I can't help but wonder, you know, just who will and exactly how would we go about enforcing laws like these. Right? Panty checks? Really. Genital inspections outside of bath change rooms at public pools? There's no legal or ethical or plausible way to enforce laws like these anyway. They exist only to foster fear and promote transphobia. They don't make anyone safer. But they do for sure make the world more dangerous for some of us.

04:27 And meanwhile, our trans children suffer. They drop out of school, or they opt out of life altogether. Trans people, especially trans and gender-nonconforming youth face additional challenges when accessing pools and gyms, but also universities, hospitals, libraries. Don't even get me started on how they treat us in airports.

04:56 If we don't move now to make sure that these places are truly open and accessible to everyone, then we just need to get honest and quit calling them public places. We need to just admit that they are really only open for people who fit neatly into one of two gender boxes, which I do not. I never have. And this starts very early.

05:34 I know a little girl. She's the daughter of a friend of mine. She's a self-identified tomboy. I'm talking about cowboy boots and Caterpillar yellow toy trucks and bug jars, the whole nine yards. One time I asked her what her favorite color was. She told me, "Camouflage."

05:53 (Laughter)

05:56 So that awesome little kid, she came home from school last October from her half day of preschool with soggy pants on because the other kids at school were harassing her when she tried to use the girls' bathroom. And the teacher had already instructed her to stay out of the boys' bathroom. And she had drunk two glasses of that red juice at the Halloween party, and I mean, who can resist that red juice, right? It's so good. And she couldn't hold her pee any longer.

06:30 Her and her classmates were four years old. They already felt empowered enough to police her use of the so-called public bathrooms. She was four years old. She had already been taught the brutal lesson that there was no bathroom door at preschool with a sign on it that welcomed people like her. She'd already learned that bathrooms were going to be a problem, and that problem started with her and was hers alone. So my friend asked me to talk to her little daughter, and I did. I wanted to tell her that me and her mom were going to march on down and talk to that school, and the problem was going to go away, but I knew that wasn't true. I wanted to tell her that it was all going to get better when she got older, but I couldn't. So I asked her to tell me the story of what had happened, asked her to tell me how it made her feel. "Mad and sad," she told me. So I told her that she wasn't alone and that it wasn't right what had happened to her, and then she asked me if I had ever peed in my pants before. I said yes, I had, but not for a really long time.

08:02(Laughter)

08:03Which of course was a lie, because you know how you hit, like, 42 or 43, and sometimes you just, I don't know, you pee a little bit when you cough or sneeze, when you're running upstairs, or you're stretching. Don't lie. It happens. Right? She doesn't need to know that, I figure.

08:21(Laughter)

08:24I told her, when you get older, your bladder is going to grow bigger, too. When you get old like me, you're going to be able to hold your pee for way longer, I promised her.

08:38"Until you can get home?" she asked me.

08:43I said, "Yes, until you can get home." She seemed to take some comfort in that.

08:57So let's just build some single stall, gender-neutral bathrooms with a little bench for getting changed into your gym clothes. We can't change the world overnight for our children, but we can give them a safe and private place to escape that world, if only for just a minute. This we can do. So let's just do it.

09:26And if you are one of those people who is sitting out there right now already coming up with a list of reasons in your head why this is not a priority, or it's too expensive, or telling yourself that giving a trans person a safe place to pee or get changed in supports a lifestyle choice that you feel offends your morality, or your masculinity, or your religious beliefs, then let me just appeal to the part of your heart that probably, hopefully, does care about the rest of the population. If you can't bring yourself to care enough about people like me, then what about women and girls with body image issues? What about anyone with body image stuff going on? What about that boy at school who is a foot shorter than his classmates, whose voice still hasn't dropped yet? Hey? Oh, grade eight, what a cruel master you can be. Right? What about people with anxiety issues? What about people with disabilities or who need assistance in there? What about folks with bodies who, for whatever reason, don't fit into the mainstream idea of what a body should look like? How many of us still feel shy or afraid to disrobe in front of our peers, and how many of us allow that fear to keep us from something as important as physical exercise? Would all those people not benefit from these single stall facilities?

11:16We can't change transphobic minds overnight, but we can give everybody a place to get changed in so that we can all get to work making the world safer for all of us.

11:38Thank you for listening.

11:39(Applause)

11:42Thank you.

11:43(Applause)