

Sophie Grace: The thing is, the way anything really is, is how it looks to me God. That's the way things are, how I see them. And the way I see you is as Sophie Grace.

It was in that period that I began to get clear that I had a different name than the one I was christened with. I began to get clear that I was someone else, and that who I was was who God said I was. The God did not perceive me as someone who was a lost and hopeless sinner, but as someone he created in a way that pleased him, and that he wanted me to get on board with that and stop fighting who I am. And this was a message that I found very hard to take on board and very hard to deal with. I was like, "You what? You can't be serious. This uproots everything I've ever known. Surely this can't be right." And the answer to that was you'd better believe it.

Brandon and Hannah: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi. Hi, I'm Hannah Black. And we're your hosts on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University. On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

H: Hey, Brandon.

B: Hey, Hannah. How's it going?

H: It's going pretty well. I thought I would check in and share with you since last time I was drinking a pumpkin spice latte. This time, I have my beloved candy cane green tea from Trader Joe's. Strongly recommend.

B: Wow. My mind is kind of exploding right now. Candy cane and green tea. I'm not sure I would have put that together, but I'm intrigued.

H: It seems like it defies the physics of taste, but it's really good. There's a cute polar bear on the box and everything.

B: Well, this is the time of year when I become a bit of a tea addict.

H: Really?

B: Yeah. Yeah. I need a warm beverage. I can't be overly caffeinated. So at my second cup of coffee, I cut myself off, and yet I'm still sort of chilly, so I do need a warm beverage. So I'll check this out.

H: I could see that. And you've already been in a knitting era, but this is like a big knitting season for you, right?

B: Oh, the knitting season. Yeah. Like Advent represents the coming of yarn along with the baby Jesus.

H: Well, he's being knit together in his mother's womb or something.

B: Well done.

H: Thank you. Thank you.

B: Yeah. So I've got a couple of hats under my belt and a couple of scarves and then a prayer shawl. Prayer shawls are some of my favorite things. Maybe there ought to be a prayer shawl episode in our future.

H: Oh, yes. I've never knit a prayer shawl before, but I'm intrigued.

B: Yeah. In retreat ministry, we had this beautiful wardrobe, and the wardrobe was always stocked with about a dozen prayer shawls that our prayer shawl ministry would make. And so then whenever anyone needed to give one as a gift, if there was a birth or a death or a time of grieving, any time of celebration, you could just go in and grab a prayer shawl and write a little card. And folks are just so overwhelmed that someone would spend, it could be 100 hours of work or more to produce this as they prayed. So it's a really beautiful ministry.

H: The thing that I love about it is that there's possibility for a prayer practice to be involved in the knitting. My knitting magnum opus so far is our Christmas stockings. So those have made their debut under the TV now, and I get to enjoy that.

B: Excellent. Oh, well, in that case, yes, we'll definitely need an episode. Speaking of this sort of cozy time of year, I know you had a fireside chat recently. I don't know that there was a fire, but in my mind, I'm imagining that there was.

H: There's a fireplace in the Berkeley Center, though we were not in that room for the fireside chat.

B: Fireside adjacent.

H: I'm not sure how the term fireside chat came to be. But yes, we had a fireside chat with Professor Sophie Grace Chappell, who was visiting Yale from the UK. And I had so many people ask me whether there was a recording that I thought, "Oh my goodness, we need her on the podcast right now." So that's how this conversation came to be. And I wonder if this would be a good time to share a little bit about Professor Chappell.

Professor Chappell has been professor of philosophy at the Open University since 2006. Her main interests in philosophy are ethics, literature, sex and gender, ancient and medieval philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of religion. She's published over 100 articles, and her most recent book is *Epiphanes, an Ethics of Experience*. She's about to publish her next book, *Transfigured: On Being a Transgender Person in a Cisgender World*. She is, we think, the first openly transgender philosophy professor in the UK, having transitioned in 2014. And she is

married with four children and a long-term member of All Souls Episcopal Church in Dundee, Scotland.

B: I just so enjoyed this conversation. She's a person who has vast amounts of knowledge about many, many things. She spoke as articulately about obviously the trans experience, history of philosophy, Scripture, as she did about Harry Potter and the Succession series on HBO, which are two passions of mine. When we set out to do the podcast, I always had hoped secretly that there'd be a Harry Potter episode, and there would be no way, any planning, that this would be a bit of a Harry Potter episode. But of course, Sophie Grace wrote a profoundly powerful open letter to J.K. Rowling about her stance on transgender folks, which was really disturbing of J.K. Rowling's public statements. And so, when Sophie Grace sort of articulated a broad, expansive, generous vision for trans folks in the world, it got a little public attention. And so, our conversations naturally veered into that space, and I was really thankful.

H: Yeah. One of my hopes for this episode is that it's helpful for people coming from all different kinds of Christian contexts, because I grew up in a very conservative context where there wasn't a discussion about transgender issues. At YDS, we're in such a liberal context that it feels like there aren't discussions about transgender issues, because it feels like one of these untouchable conversations. So, I do hope that people from all different kinds of contexts can find food for thought in this conversation and new questions and new ways of thinking.

B: This is part of, I think, the utter challenge right now of being a queer person, being trans, is there are certain spaces that are super open-affirming, where it almost, with lots of privilege and lots of straightness, I say this. It's just not an issue, for the most part. I'm sure straight folks say all sorts of insensitive things, even at a place like YDS. And then, you sort of wander into spaces like in Tennessee, where you just don't even know where you're safe and how the community will welcome you or ostracize you or be violent to you. So, it just must be exhausting. I mean, it makes me all the more excited for a conversation like this to sort of live in the airwaves.

H: Welcome to Professor Sophie Grace Chappell. We're so excited you're here with us. We'd like you to be here. Thank you very much. Maybe a good place to start being positioned as an Episcopal Seminary would be to ask you about your experiences of the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church, so that our listeners can get to know you a little bit.

SG: Well, it's a long story. I've been a churchgoer of one sort or another all my life. Until 1998, I was fairly adamantly hardcore evangelical enough to be anti-trans and anti-gay, homophobic as well. And it was only a change in things between me and God, really, in May 1998, that made me take a different line. So, it did all start from experience. And the central experience, I think, of most of my life up to that point in church contexts and beyond, is because I had a Christian faith and because I viewed being transgender myself, which I knew I was, but I wanted to run away from that. I viewed it as something evil within me that needed to be extirpated. And I thought one of the points of religion was to try and help me in that extirpation, try and help me to uproot this bad thing from inside me. I had this sort of Manichean view of myself as someone

who was possessed by a kind of evil in a certain sort of way. And there was a part of me that was just bad and needed to be got rid of. And I spent many years trying to fight that and calling on church for resources to try and fight that. I mean, that was certainly the kind of view that the church where I grew up was situated. They thought very much that being trans was a bad thing and an unchristian thing and an unclean thing and a sinful thing and a dirty thing and a dark thing, all that stuff. And so, I spent a lot of my life begging God to help me get rid of it because being trans tormented me because I couldn't get rid of it. And the more I prayed about it, the more I obsessed about it, the more it remained part of who I was. And it was like trying to tear out a part of my own heart, a part of my own being. It was not a healthy way to live. And it caused me huge amounts of turmoil and unhappiness. I am someone who's always had a kind of fairly intimate relationship with how I understand God. And the quick and crude way of saying what happened was I was saying, "God, please help me fight this battle." And God's answer to that in the end over about a month in May 1998 was, "You don't need to fight this battle because I made you this way and this is who you're meant to be. This isn't a mistake and this isn't evil within you. This is just a side of yourself that you have never accepted and never reconciled yourself to." I mean, this is continuing on the paraphrase of what I felt I was being told, what I thought it was understanding. "The thing is, the way anything really is, is how it looks to me God. That's the way things are, how I see them. And the way I see you is at Sophie Grace." It was in that period that I began to get clear that I had a different name than the one I was christened with. I began to get clear that I was someone else and that who I was was who God said I was. That God did not perceive me as someone who was just a lost and hopeless sinner, but as someone he created in a way that pleased him and that he wanted me to get on board with that and stop fighting who I am. And this was a message that I found very hard to take on board and very hard to deal with. I was like, "You what? You can't be serious. This uproots everything I've ever known. Surely this can't be right." And the answer to that was you'd better believe it.

B: I'm so thankful for this story. It strikes me how important trust is amid a moment like this because the official structure of the church is telling you something different and you're experiencing a kind of epiphany that must be trusted. And I wonder about what that trust felt like in those early moments and who did you go to within the church to lean on? I presume you needed friends and support systems because the traditional support system I presume, especially in the late 90s, might not have been so welcoming. So what was that experience like of finding a community of support?

SG: It's something I hardly talked about to anyone in the church or in my family or anywhere else until 10 years later. So for a long time, this was a secret about me that only I knew. And I was sure that I'd heard it right because I tested what I thought I was hearing very hard. I went on testing it. And at first it didn't seem to lead to integration, to unity in myself. It just seemed to lead to a division in a different place. And it was very hard. And I didn't feel I could try the church. Although by 1998, we had just moved to Scotland and we were in a church where I think I would have been safe to say what was going on in me. But my past experiences of trying to get help from the church had been very difficult. And what regularly happened, and I think this gives the light to something that people often say about trans people. Some people say, some

people are hostile to trans people, say that we only claim to be trans because we're gay really, and we're afraid to admit that we're gay. Well, exactly the opposite is what I experienced because more than once I wanted to go to the church for support when I was fighting being trans pre-1998. I chickened out at the last moment. I couldn't bear to tell them that I was trans. So I said I was gay instead, because that was easier to say. I mean, it wasn't entirely untrue. I am bisexual, I guess. It wasn't completely untrue. But it wasn't what was biting me. It wasn't the real problem. I mean, there was another occasion when I was much younger, I was about 18, where I went to a church council who was supposed to be able to help me. And I confessed my problem in the words I had at the time. And the council's response was, "What's a transvestite?" And at that point, I just walked out. I just thought, "I can't do this. I can't cope with this. If he doesn't even know that, he can't help me." So my past experiences of seeking help had been pretty ropey. And I don't think I really got help in the counseling sense until about 2011, when I went to a counselor about all this.

H: And then I think I remember you talking about going to church for the first time as Sophie Grace, and that being a totally different experience. Could you say a little bit about that?

SG: Yeah, that was in 2014, when lots of other things had been worked through and worked out in various contexts. And I was surer of who I was. And I'd come clean to my family to the degree I hadn't done before. And so we were all united and happy with the decision. So I walked into church about this time of year in 2014. And I talked to the priest about the situation before that, but no one officially knew if I was going to do this. And my church just shrugged it off. They said, "Okay, fine. You're here, you're trans, whatever. Let's get on with mass." In a truly Scottish way, they just took it in their stride and carried on. And my church have always been completely accepting. I mean, there have been a few eruptions with particular individuals, but the church has never been anything but accepting. And that's been a great joy to us and a great strength to us. And when I compare some of the churches I've been in the past, where you know, you'd be fighting every step of the way, for a minimum acceptance, to the point where you thought, "It's just not worth the fight. I can't take this every Sunday."

H: Yeah.

B: "Going away." It's not been like that in all souls in the gallery. And I'm hugely grateful. One person I remember particularly, he's just died recently, a lovely man in the church. I think he was in his mid-80s and he had a hard time at the end. Various diseases ganged up on him. And he, poor chap, died a little while ago now. And I don't know whether Bob had ever met a trans person before. And he was in his 80s, so people think that old people are necessarily hard about these things and resistant to change. And he just, he was lovely about it. And you know, "You're such a funny lady," he would say things like that. And he would insist on giving me a kiss rather than handshake. Bob was great. And I was so grateful for that welcome.

B: I'm thinking of some of my queer friends and trans folks who are just so dear to me, but who don't share the same comfort in Christian spaces. And when I describe the kind of space that, for example, we and many people have created here at Berkeley and the Episcopal Church,

where queer folks, gay folks, trans folks are celebrated, who are creating this expansive community with us, always imperfectly, right? But I think have created a real brave space where people from many different backgrounds and experiences can come together. When I talk to folks who don't know of communities like this and they look at the Christian community and they say, "Christianity is the opposite of queerness. It is hateful, it's exclusionary. It could never be a place where I as a queer person could feel safe." What words do you have for them? Both I'm sure of compassion and deep understanding and encouragement, because I often struggle to know how to meet this incredulity in my friends.

SG: Well, I'll respond with an anecdote from when I was a university student. I was, for my sins, a fairly committed member of what's known as OICU, the Oxford Intercollegiate Christian Union, when I was a student at Oxford. And there was in the evangelical group at Oxford a division between the conservative evangelicals and the charismatic evangelicals. And I was on the charismatic side of this, and still am. I may not be an evangelical anymore, but I still call myself a charismatic. But we spent about three years trying to change the whole culture so that it was at least welcoming to people who are charismatic. I think those on the other side perhaps thought there was more to it than we were engaged in a takeover. I don't really think I'm that.

H: Sinister.

SG: I was young and brash. What I do think is worth saying is that what I learned from that experience is, you go back on the OICU web pages two or three years later, and it's completely reverted to exactly the type that we were trying to stop it being when we put in all that effort. And looking back, I thought, what a waste of time. And I thought, you know, never, never, never use your time like that again. When you find that an institution, a setup is not helpful, very often it's better just to get out of Dodge City and find your own. Sometimes you have to say, why look for the living among the dead, frankly. And sometimes you have to say, shake the dust off your feet, go somewhere else. This doesn't work. And it's not worth your energy to try and change it. Get aboard a train that's going somewhere good and where you'll be welcome. And don't resent the people who don't accept you, don't hate them for not accepting you. Don't argue with them, don't reason with them. Just walk away. Go somewhere sane. It'll keep you sane. And I think that'd be very much my attitude to church today. I haven't needed to look for churches since '98. We've been lucky because we've been in the same one ever since. If I was looking for church now, that's what it'd say. Okay, this is the Howling Wolf Pentecostal Church of Snake Handling, and as it turns out, you're not very accepting of people like me here. Okay, fine. That's your thing. On you go. I'm going somewhere else. That's the only sane response. Anything else leads to madness.

[20:37]

B: This is a question that I have sort of sat with for a long, long time. I love your wisdom on this. And I suppose there's no formula and maybe what I'm asking for is a formula. But I'm wondering about the discernment around staying and leaving. And this is applicable in so many different areas of life. Moments where I need to stay and work for change from within versus those

moments where I'm called to leave because it's just no longer healthy for me or I'm not moving the dial. I wonder for folks who find themselves in that discernment and feel almost maybe some guilt, "Gosh, if I don't stay and change this, who is going to..." All that kind of commentary. Any sort of support or wisdom for folks who are just right in the thick of that discernment?

SG: Yeah, I need to qualify what I've just said because there are contexts where you should stand your ground. It's not always right to run. And it is hard to know which you should do. What I will say is I think we're naturally drawn towards the stay and fight option too much. And we don't give enough consideration to find a different home as an alternative to that. So yes, sometimes there will be places where you have to take a stand. I wrote *Trans Figured*, partly because I'm not running away. And we've got a really horrifyingly transphobic public scene in the UK now that the media are just absolutely dominated in a way that I think is hard to grasp if you're in the US. They're just dominated by trans-exclusionary voices. And that's really nasty. And if I was running from everything, I'd have moved away from that if it were practical, but it isn't. So sometimes you do have to stand and stick to your guns and keep saying what you think is important. And sometimes you don't. I think what I'd say is, if you're like me anyway, if you're a public spokeswoman for trans people, then politics is hard to avoid. So I'm rather stuck with that battle. Whereas where you go on a Sunday morning, there is a choice of places you can go. And you can and should look for somewhere where you can rest.

H: It seems like you want a safe community, but then willingness to engage in dialogue, but in a different mode almost, like as a philosopher, or in my case, as a theologian, or we need both as a society, and they're not necessarily the same thing.

SG: And I think also, especially when society is getting increasingly transphobic like it is in the UK at the moment, I think it's important in a lot of contexts just to be present and just to show people that I exist and I'm not a monster. And all the things they've read about people like me in the Daily Mail that are just outright lies. Because one of the big things that the process of attacks on trans people is doing is dehumanization. And a big part of dehumanization is removing our faces, making us a faceless mob. So if you're a trans exclusionary voice in Britain at the moment, you're all over telly and the press and the rest of it, just like that. If you're a trans inclusive voice, well, they make a tactical decision whether they're going to pretend you don't exist, or whether they're going to smear you. I mostly have been ignored with a side order of being smeared. What I'm saying is it's important to be visible and present, because that in itself makes a difference because people see you're human. One shouldn't underestimate the extent to which that's necessary in church too. Right. Not just in the supermarket.

H: Yeah, that's a really excellent point. So I was living in the UK for the last four years or so, but I got the feeling that our students had actually caught wind of some of the vitriol when J.K. Rowling started making statements. And I know this is something that you've thought a lot about. So I wonder whether you'd be willing to share with us some of your experiences of *Harry Potter*, some of your experiences of this conversation that has happened *at us*.

SG: In our family, we grew up reading *Harry Potter* as a family together. I think the books

started coming out in 1998, didn't they? Which was just when my oldest child was ready for them, really.

H: Yeah, it's perfect timing.

SG: So we started reading them, we kept reading them. And a lot of what J.K. Rowling was saying did seem like a good metaphor, and perhaps allegorically intended for people who are different in all sorts of ways, no doubt, but in particular, people who have superpowers, as we say in another context, people who have a hidden side to them, which is much more technicolor, much more interesting than the grey conformist face that they're forced to show in public. And people who have these secret abilities and these amazing perspectives on the world, which a lot of people just don't appreciate, or are actively afraid of, or want to vilify, for whatever reason. And so it sounded to me all along just for that reason to start with, like J.K. Rowling was on the side of gay and trans people, you know.

Almost the first thing that happens in the first book is that Dudley Dursley, who's this dreadful pillar of Daily Mail group think and reactionary conservatism, and he sees these people in all these brightly coloured robes, and he's saying it's so barbaric and there's some kind of freak show going on, and all this stuff. And he's greeted by a wizard, you know, who's about four foot nothing and wearing a purple hat, brightly coloured clothes, who says, "Greetings for Voldemort has fallen!" says this person to him, and shakes him warmly by the hand, and Mr. Dursley: "Hmph hmph hmph! How disgraceful! Hmph!" So it just looked a celebration of all things, well, in both senses, the word gay, offbeat, interesting, alternative, different, risk taking, adventurous, it sounded like she was into all those things.

And then we got things later on in the books, like in particular, Remus Lupin, who has this dark secret about himself that he changes whether he might or not into something that he doesn't appear to be. And I think a lot of trans people have that kind of feeling about themselves, you know, there's a side of themselves which makes them want to be something different from what they seem to be. And they have to find a way of coping with that.

H: And I mean, with Lupin, it's like, I have to hide this, otherwise I'll get fired, which feels resonant.

SG: It certainly does. Yeah. And the whole thing is a torture to poor Remus Lupin, because he's in a world where his secret nature cannot be accepted. And where indeed there is something dangerous about his secret nature. So that all resonated. And the Mirror of Erised, also, in the first book, a picture which I took to heart immediately, I read it, you know, if you looked in the mirror, you would see yourself as you really want to be. And yeah, that sounded like a picture for all trans people. So yeah, it seemed like a series which was right on our side. But then.

B: I'm thinking of Hermione as well. And the way in which she sort of breaks the binaries, right? She's part wizard. She's part muggle. And what a big deal this is for the community, but for both communities, right? Of honoring her because of this sort of joint identity that she has. And of

course, you know, she's one of the great heroes of the whole series. Heartbreaking when J.K. Rowling started all this hatred. And maybe you've done this already, but connect this to what's happening in the UK. I mean, this is sort of puzzling for someone very American and maybe someone who hasn't lived for the last four years in England, like you have Hannah.

SG: So she's part of a kind of bigger chorus of hateful voices as I understand it, right? Yeah, I mean, I don't think she sees herself as hateful, but I'm afraid she has got more and more drawn into saying things about trans people that just aren't right and that depict us as monsters. And she does have some fairly dodgy friends on Twitter and people who clearly are hate mongers about trans people. And she seems perfectly content with them. She's been quite subtle about it. And she's built in quite a lot of plausible deniability, I suppose you could say. So she doesn't usually say straight up, obviously flagrantly transphobic things about people. But there's a lot about the way she talks about us talking about a threat, primarily as a threat, talking about a disruptive element which threatens things that she cares about and is right to care about, of course. And that is hard to take.

And for example, she said in her statement about transgender, and I refer to this in my open letter, I would march with you if you were oppressed, she said to trans people. Well, you know, first up, we are actually. And how come you haven't noticed that? What's with the hypothetical conditional? It's not hypothetical. We are actually oppressed. And secondly, there was a big march about conversion therapy in, I think, 2022. And the issue was whether trans people should have the same protection from conversion therapy as gay people in the UK. Now, that is as plain a case of discrimination against trans people as you can possibly imagine, saying we don't get to be protected from people to gaslight us into denying that we're trans. Whereas gay people do get to be protected from that. There was a march about that in London. I couldn't be there myself. I went to an equivalent protest in Dundee, but there was a big march about this issue in London. And it was a case where trans people were being oppressed. And there was a call for people who'd said they would march with us to march with us. And actually, J.K. Rowling, rather prominently and rather flagrantly, went out for lunch with a bunch of people who are all of them pretty strongly engaged in the trans-exclusionary movement. And she kind of waved it in our faces that she was at this lunch and not marching. And I don't know whether that was intentional. But if it wasn't intentional, it was remarkably heavy.

So she's by no means the worst person who writes on these subjects. And I do understand that she thinks she's got hold of real problems, that she thinks she's on to what they always call genuine concerns. I understand that she thinks she's doing that. But I worry about the extent to which she just doesn't listen to voices outside her own echo chamber.

H: That's a really interesting way of framing it. And I think a really helpful way into the conversation, actually. And for listeners who want more of this kind of a thing, definitely look up Professor Chappell's open letter, and that can kind of give you some language and some ways to think about this.

And I wonder now if we can turn to your forthcoming book, *Trans Figured*, which you've referred

to a couple of times, but I'd love if you could share some of that with us, tell us about it. And then we'll all be ready to grab it from the shelves shortly.

[31:21]

SG: Well, yes, roll up, roll up. The book's coming out in April next year. I assume it's the same publication date in the US and the UK. I don't actually know. So *Trans Figured* is a book about trying to figure out what transgender actually is and what it's like for people who are transgender. So the subtitle is on being a transgender person in a cisgendered world. And it is about this fact about those of us who are transgender that we find ourselves differently wired from most people around us. That's never going to change. I mean, contrary to various social contagion theorists, trans people are never going to be the majority. We're always going to be a small minority in our society, but a persistent minority that we've always been around, we don't go away. That's one of the things I want to say in the book, that the trans people are a reality. And that wherever there have been people, there have been trans people as far as we can make out. And we have the same right to exist as anybody else. We're not monsters. We're not freaks. We're not delusional. Being trans is, in itself, absolutely fine. It's just another way of being human. It's not a disease. It's not a mental illness. We don't need to be fixed or cured. What we need is to be accepted as human beings like any others and allowed to live our lives in our way. So that's what the book is about. And to that end, I bring together various things.

So most of the book is memoir, mostly going into how it was before the days in 1998, when everything changed. It's mainly about what it's like to be trans before that. And it's about two themes in particular, I suppose. First of all, some trans exclusionary people say there is no such thing as a trans kid. That could not be more false. Some children are transgender. What trans exclusionaries want to say is that there aren't any trans kids because trans is an adult choice, and it's a lifestyle choice, and it's a choice of sexual lifestyle. And, you know, "Stop, stop, stop, stop," I'm saying. First of all, it isn't sexual. It's not the same dial as sexual orientation. And that's a persistent confusion, which of course, when I tried to go to counselors about trans and chickened out and talked about being gay instead, I was feeding into that confusion or feeding out of it. I wasn't clear about the difference myself for most of my life. But being trans is not a form of sexual orientation. It's a form of gender orientation. It's about how you see yourself, how you feel yourself to be. It's about an experience that many people describe as feeling you're in the wrong body, feeling you belong on the other side of that binary classification.

And there is no such thing as a trans kid, people say, well, nonsense, because from the moment I knew anything, I knew that I wasn't happy in my birth gender. I wasn't happy living as a boy and being represented as a boy by other people and having to represent myself as a boy to myself. And I had the aspiration to change all that very early on, and got it beaten out of me by my parents and my school, sometimes literally beaten out of me. And they were doing what was right by their light in about 1970. But they couldn't have been more wrong. And they couldn't change my nature. It wasn't a point about me that you could change. And trying to change it made for a great deal of unhappiness and pain in my life. And I suppose one of the things I want to say above all is don't assume that kids who say that they want to live in the gender they

weren't assigned at birth, don't assume that they're confused, don't assume they're ill, don't assume that it's just a phase, don't assume that you can beat it out of them. I mean, obviously, it would be surprising if the conversion rate from people who come out with that kind of utterance occasionally, to people who are actually trans, it would be surprising if it's 100%. But actually, it's pretty high. Most people who say that mean it. And one reason why we can know they mean it is because of the sheer social cost of saying it. And I can tell you it was a whole lot higher in the 70s. And at least at first, I went on saying it. I didn't stop saying it. I stopped saying it in the end, because I became convinced that I needed to stop giving into this darkness within to try and fight it. I became convinced that that was the Christian thing to do. And I was dead wrong. And it took me a long time to unlearn that mistake. And it would have been, I think, a happier story if I'd learned sooner. So that's one of the main things I'm trying to say in this book. There are trans kids, and most of the people who put themselves, expose themselves in an enormously dangerous way by saying this is who I am, they mean it. And they deserve to be respected and indeed treasured for being who they are. Because it's not wrong to be that way. It's another shade in the rainbow, it should be accepted.

B: And so when I think about your, I guess, the subtitle of the book, it suggests that this is just another way of being human, right?

SG: Yeah.

B: And each way of being, and there's as many ways of being human in one way, I guess, as there are human beings on the planet. But each way of being has its own particular gift and brilliance and maybe insight. And I wonder as you think about your vocation as a philosopher, you know, when you approach the scriptures, when you approach Dante, is there a particular lens or is there a particular gift or insight that you have because of your trans identity that you're aware of, explicitly aware of, or maybe just implicitly aware of? And how do you name that?

SG: I think that being trans, for me, influences everything I do, and the way I do everything. And I'm not sure I can articulate exactly how. And I'm not sure I want to try and articulate exactly how because I don't want to be too self-conscious about it. But I think, what can I say, I think I have a kind of exuberance in what I do, which comes out best when I'm just being myself, and which is at its happiest when I'm at my happiest, and which is at its most creative. I found this in 1998, when I finally gave into this side of myself, I found there was a huge outburst of creative energy as a result of that. Because it's like trying to drive a bus with the handbrake on, and suddenly you take the handbrake off and it gets a whole lot easier to do. You're not fighting something anymore. And you use that energy, and it becomes creative, instead of something that's holding you back. And I think up to that point, when I was fighting that side of myself, I think being trans still infused everything else I did, but in a different way, in a more minor key, if you like, in a more melancholy way. There was always this distance between whatever I was doing and how I talked about it. There was always this gap of pain between where I wanted to be, and what I wanted to say, and where I actually was, and what I felt I could say.

And I see that kind of gap of pain, as I called it, in some of my favourite writers, like Gerard

Manley Hopkins, for whom the problem was that he was gay, and he'd spend his whole life running away from that. Well, actually, at Oxford, it's pretty clear he didn't run away from it. And he actually had one or two, almost certainly platonic, kind of gay affairs. And he ran so hard away from that, that side of himself, into the Roman Catholic Church, into the priesthood, into the Society of Jesus. Gerard Manley Hopkins ran all the way, and his verse gets power from the awful internal torture: "thoughts against thoughts, and groans grind," that you sense when you read him, "No worse there is none, pitched past pang of grief." That kind of writing, in what are called the terrible sonnets, not because they're really bad poetry, but because the experience that they're in is terrible. I've always really identified with Hopkins without ever quite knowing. Well, until recently, never quite knowing why. And it's because he's screwed up in something like the way that I was screwed up when I was younger.

And when you get that force on board, the force in his case of being gay, the force in my case of being trans, when you get that force on board, and faring along with your other energies, then you do feel very empowered. One thing that the whole business has given me, I think, is a certain kind of capacity for irony. You're always distanced upon whatever you say. You can always see the possibilities for taking a step back and saying things with ironic overtones. It's hard to say things straight. It doesn't make you into a twisty person necessarily. It doesn't make you into a skullduggerer. But it does make you into someone who is always good at hiding, good at concealing.

H: Yeah, you can hear that disjointedness in the title about living in a cisgendered world. There's just frequently not an alignment of your moving about the world in the world.

SG: It's something I feel every time I use the London Tube, for example, I'm wandering around thinking, "Well, how's this going to pan out? Here's everyone else all looking like that. And here's me looking like this. What happens next, I wonder?" That's also the kind of ironic distancing. I mean, if I get into confrontations, a part of me is stepping back and watching the confrontation happen.

H: I want to stick close to *Trans Figured* for just a few more moments, because I wonder if you have any excerpts you'd like to share with us.

SG: Well, let me read you a little bit from early on in the book.

H: Yes, please.

SG: About being at school. Being transgender is not just a confused version of being gay. The two things are different. But there is such a thing as a distinctive trans sexuality, or at least there is in my case. And why shouldn't there be? And if I'd had better information and self understanding, and if I hadn't been exposed to so much hostile trans exclusionary, and for that matter, homophobic gender ideology, then I'd have understood all that a long time ago. But how was I going to admit any of this? I was in a civil war. And oh, Jesus, I had promised.

Oh, let me feel thee near me. The world is ever near. I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear. My foes are ever near me, around me and within. But Jesus draw thou nearer, and shield my soul from sin.

Don't dream it, be it, said the song of the end of the Rocky Horror Show, a film that psychologically I blocked my ears and ran away from to avoid hearing what it was saying to me. Don't dream it, be it. But I was busy doing my best, not even to dream it. If my surroundings were harsh and discouraging, I took that harshness and discouragement into myself. Maybe if life out there was giving me a wire brush soaked in disinfectant, I needed to take the same approach to life in here, inside me. Maybe the savage process of excoriation of who I was, that others seemed to want, needed to be combined with self excoriation. Another hymn that mattered deeply to me was the Easter hymn, "Thine Be the Glory." The promise and resurrection of leaving all this behind and becoming completely shining right new, of just stopping being so bloody complicated and difficult. Every year when Easter came around, I would turn away from the manifold failures of Lent, to the hope of suddenly becoming pure, just like that, of looking the Lord in the eye at last, and just being sorted out.

No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of Life. Life is nought without thee. Aid is in our strife. Make us more than conquer us through thy deathless love. Bring us, sake, through Jordan, to thy home above.

And there were, and there are, moments of glory, moments of new life, moments where it felt, though only briefly, like something transformative and transfiguring really had happened to me. I think that that was a genuine experience. I think that it did happen. I think that it was something that sometimes seemed right for me. But I found it so hard to keep hold of. I found it so hard to allow myself to be the person who I felt myself to be, at times, the trans person, the girl me. I couldn't shake off that side of me, but I couldn't accept it either. I knew perfectly well that if I carried on trying to get rid of my longing to be female, I wouldn't succeed. But I also knew perfectly well that if I tried to give into that longing to go with it, to make whatever small secret accommodations were possible for me in that direction, then I wouldn't succeed either. I wouldn't manage to convince myself that it was all right to be like this. And I knew this from experience because I did try sometimes to give into the longing to be a girl and not a boy. But whenever I did, I was immediately overwhelmed with guilt and self-hatred. I was caught, in fact, in what 20 years later I learned was called a purging cycle. I found that I had to stop as soon as I started. And I found that as soon as I stopped, I had to start again. It wasn't accidental that when I came to write a PhD between 1989 and 1992, I wrote it on freedom of action and weakness of the will. Because freedom of action was precisely what it wouldn't allow myself and weakness of the will, this ability to see that something is right, and yet inability to do it. That was me too, in both directions. Sometimes I saw being trans as right and yet couldn't do it. And sometimes I saw rejecting my being trans as right. And I couldn't do that either.

There was a time when I sat on the damp grass in humid, hazy English sunshine in a litter-strewn field in Bedfordshire on the Sunday morning of the Greenbelt Festival in perhaps 1982, listening to a slow, mournful, pleading, soul-blues singer as communion bread and wine were

shared among the ragged, sleepy crowd, feeling as broken and as empty and as far from God as the singer sounded. I'm wondering if I would always feel this broken. I'm wondering why I always felt so broken. And because of all the memories I'd suppressed, not knowing at all.

The only thing I did was wrong, was stay in the wilderness too long. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on. Hold on.

Behind and above the rain clouds of the singer's desolation, I sensed a luminous warmth of mercy and forgiveness. Some are up there, some are out there. And somehow it included me as well. And somehow it understood me better than I understood myself, yet shining down on me from such an infinite distance and I was still broken. That had changed.

H: That was so beautiful.

B: Thank you. I can't wait until this book is available on the bookshelves. I can just share it with, you know, share with the world. I mean, it's such a bright light. And what I'm feeling in the moment is this heaviness of lament, thinking how much energy has been lost and spent in the necessary hiding and the distancing and the self-rejection and like how much creativity and love and just pure energy has been diverted. And this seems to be part of the opportunity of this moment, is to create communities where some huge percentage of folks' life energy doesn't have to be suppressed and repressed and surveilling communities. You know, I think a dear, dear friend of mine said, you know, I'm, I spend so, who's queer, I spend so much time scanning a community when I walk in the room to assess if it's safe. And it's something as a cis person that I just do very, very little of and just the appreciation of how much energy that takes. And so I'm just sort of feeling both this lament, this heaviness, but also this incredible hope that your voice will be amplified through this book in the coming weeks and months.

SG: Well, I'd love that. We'll see what happens. Yeah, I mean, the song, Hold On, the Springsteen song is a song that I find incredibly moving just for this reason. You know, the only thing I did was wrong with Stay in the Wilderness Too Long. The song is talking about the way in which racial oppression can become internalized and you do things to yourself. You enact cruelty upon yourself. And just getting free in your mind, I mean, James Baldwin is a wonderful writer about this. Just getting free in your mind of what's been done to you is very hard and takes years. But what's also there in the song, I agree with you absolutely about this. What's also there in the song is the hope of liberation. And the fact that lamenting the lost years is a way of beginning to redeem them. That's one of the reasons why I wrote *Trans Figured*, because Hold On is a song about pain. And it's also about redeeming that pain through singing about the pain. And I've had my own problem with being trans. And I don't want to pretend for a moment, by the way, that I've lived an enormously privileged life in most respects. Of course I have, obviously I have. I've been incredibly lucky. But you know, the crowning grace is really that I get to be Sophie Grace. And without that, everything else would always have been a kind of hollow thing.

So I'm very glad that that's happened. And there is an enormous amount of anger and sorrow in

me at the wasted years of my own life. And at the years that people are being forced to waste here and now in our world, by cruel and utterly unnecessary constraints imposed on them. Utterly unnecessary. Imposed on them by people who just want someone to hate, or by people who have a dogma to preach, instead of a gospel to proclaim, or by fascists who want to teach their populations to hate someone as a distraction from what they the fascists are doing. I get enormously angry about these things. And I think some of that anger probably comes across in the ranty bits of *Trans Figured* as well.

The book is a ragbag and deliberately so. One of the things that I'm always saying as a philosopher is straightforward, esoteric argument using the kind of patterns of argument that you can get in a logic textbook. That's absolutely fine. But it's not the only way to do philosophy. There's lots of ways to do philosophy. And *Trans Figured* builds on that, which is one of the main lessons about style of *Epiphanies*. And *Trans Figured* builds on that lesson by being a lot of the time very narrative in style, and by trying poetry as a form of doing philosophy, by trying a piece of science fiction writing in "Lissounes" at the end of the book, as a form of doing philosophy, there are open letters in there. And they're a straight philosophical papers too. So in the case of "Lissounes" is saying, what if we did have a society where most people were trans women, they're either cis women or trans women, and where the norm is to be a trans woman. And if you're not a trans woman, if you're a cis man, then you're a bit down the pecking order. A society like that would, I want to make perfectly clear, this isn't utopia, as far as I can say, this isn't how I want things to be. It's alletopia. It's another way that things could be, you know, in metaphysical fictional space. It's the kind of thing that Ursula Le Guin might have written about. If the world was that like, was like that, what would it be like? How would it spell out in detail? And what would it teach us? So yeah, I try all kinds of different ways of doing philosophy in the book.

And it was a long time before I realized I was writing a book. And there's memoir, which I was putting together kind of as a diary in real time, not knowing that it would build up into a book. And then the various other papers, and I looked at them all together, oh, hang on, there's a book here.

H: Well, Sophie Grace, I want to say thank you again. I wish we could just keep talking for another probably five hours, because I think there's so much there that we could talk about. And I hope this is a real blessing that is thought provoking and edifying for our listeners. I just I can't say enough how grateful I am and how beautiful of an experience this has been for me.

SG: It's lovely to talk with you.

B: Yeah, thank you so much for all the light that you shine, Sophie Grace in the world. And we look forward to continuing the conversation in the future.

H & B: Thank you for listening to The Leader's Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydivinity.yale.edu/podcast. Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you

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