

views: Barbies and Trucks: Gender Lessons at WalMart

It seems as though every time I go to Wal-Mart I am confronted with some sort of gender stereotype. For instance, I was on my way to the bathroom during my last visit there and in front of me was a man with a boy roughly 7 years old. As we were heading in the same direction the boy in front of me started towards the women's bathroom, only to be steered towards the men's room. I heard the man say to him, "That's the girl's bathroom, see the dress on the door?"

My head raced with so many different things I wanted to say to both the man and the little boy. For starters, I hate that public women's bathrooms have a figure on the door wearing a dress. I know those symbols have been in place for so long that they are hard to fight, but those symbols lead to people jumping to conclusions when they mistakenly call me 'sir', which I am greeted with about 95% of the time when I walk into Wal-Mart.

"Hello, sir, would you like a shopping cart?" I've even had a few cashiers bid me to "Have a good day, sir."

Now, I don't want to pick on one of my favorite shopping places in the world. I mean, where else can I get shampoo for \$.97? Sometimes I tell myself to be patient with people, that oftentimes those same people who hand me a false label, along with my smiley-face sticker, are older senior citizens. The generation gap is the problem, I tell myself. But what about the middle-aged men and women who teach their kids that girls are distinguished by dresses and boys are not?

Some parents may not think they are sending their kids mixed messages, but I can imagine the confusion that the boy in front of

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me would have felt if he would have turned around and got a good look at me: "Daddy, why did that boy go into the girl's bathroom?" The father, who would assume that I could read and had, in fact, gone into the correct room, would assure his kid that I was a girl. "But why does she have such short hair? Only boys have hair like that." At this point the father would either shut his kid up and throw him in front of a urinal or explain to him that some girls have

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short hair and boys can have long hair. He may even remind his kid that pink is not just for girls and that toy motorcycles are not just for boys. That may be wishful thinking, but I will not judge the man in front of me.

As a preschool teacher, I've weathered a few debates with 4- and 5-year-olds over the fact that Barbies are not just for girls. I have many times had to answer the question: "Are you a boy or a girl?" I usually reply by asking them what they think. More often than not they grin at me and say, "You're a girl." I then use this time to guide them through the process of

understanding that short hair doesn't equate to a penis. I'm gentle with them because I know they are too young to fully grasp a concept that goes against what their parents have taught them so far. I can't say my words would be so gentle with their parents. I do have some hope for this generation of kids, though.

One day I overheard a small group of my kids talking about marriage, giggling over the idea of one marrying the other one. I smiled to hear them talk about being the best man and having a honeymoon. I restrained myself from clouding their image by referring to any other type of marriage when I heard a little girl say that she was going to marry her best friend someday. The boys made sounds of disapproval and said, "Girls can't marry girls!" The little girl looked

at me and said, "I can marry whomever I want, right, Amber?" I said, "Sure, you can marry whoever you love that loves you back." They then went on to talk and laugh about the idea of marrying their mom or their dad, but I think some of them got the point. Someday when I have kids and read them the nursery rhyme about little girls made from sugar and spice and everything nice, I'll also include Ford trucks, buzzed hair and steel-toed boots. ▼

Amber Leventry is a 22-year-old trying to find her place in the after-college world. She currently lives in

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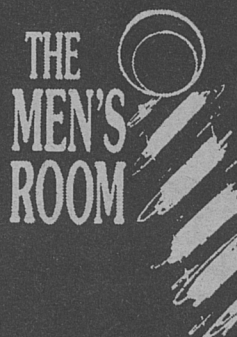
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