



ellen krug  
writer, lawyer, human

## **Living as Transgender: Compassion for One's Self and for Others**

**Iowa State University**

**Ames, Iowa**

**November 20, 2013**

### **Ellen Krug:**

Thank you for that very kind introduction.

It has been so incredibly emotional for me here today, being back home in Iowa, with my people. Your welcome has been overwhelming, and I've been treated like a rock star.

I highly recommend getting rock star treatment at least once in your life. It does the soul good! It's not too bad for the ego, either.

Before I start, I have a very, very long list of organizations and people to thank, specifically the Ames PFLAG chapter; the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Student Services Center; the LGBTQA Alliance of Iowa State University; the Gamma Rho Lambda Colony; Government of the Student Body, Committee on Lectures; and the Multicultural Student Programming Advisory Council. I also need to express my deep thanks and appreciation to Pat Spangler, Paul and Linda Kaufmann, Cyndie Drury, Alison Carleton, Brad Freihoefer, Sarah Miller and Blake Miller.

I apologize if I left anyone out of that incredibly long list of people and organizations that worked very hard and deliberately to get me to Ames. It's truly been a team and collaborative effort, and I'm in awe of their organizational and scheduling skills. Thank you again.

I also have to admit that speaking from a scripted speech is not my usual practice. I've always spoken extemporaneously, but tonight I've felt the need to have my words documented. That doesn't mean I won't lapse into speaking from the heart or off the cuff—you'll certainly know if and when I do that. Please just work with me. And by all means, I will take questions afterwards.

To the extent I use names here, some will be pseudonyms. As I write in my memoir, my life has intersected with many people. Not all of them have wanted to take my gender journey with me. I respect that and have tried to give them their desired space.

One last preliminary: I'm Buddhist and subscribe to the view of living as a "Small I" as compared to the egotistical "Big I." I'm really no one extraordinary; instead, I'm just a survivor like the rest of you in this room. And no, I don't have it all figured out—there still are things that I'm working on. Nonetheless, I will share parts of my personal story tonight because I believe in the power of stories. They are the one sure fire way of connecting with others. The lessons inherent in personal stories ripple from person to person, human to human, and in that way, all of us have a vested interest in ensuring that people tell their stories. Indeed, that's the very first thing I ask someone new in my life, "Please, tell me your story."

Thus, it's not all about me, but then again, it's hard to share without saying something about your life.

I'm also no expert of anything. Yes, I've had 17 years of therapy, and yes, that's automatically qualified me to hold a therapist's license in 22 different states and three provinces of Canada. Still, I'm just an ordinary person who's simply lucky enough to be standing here before you.

The title of my talk is "Living as Transgender: Compassion for One's Self and for Others." And thus, on this sacred day for transgender people, our Day of Remembrance, I'd like to set a tone of hope and promise. Yes, of course, we need to honor those who have suffered and who we've lost, but I also believe in inspiring others to lead healthy and satisfying lives.

Let me begin with a quick story. In May, 2009, I transitioned from man to woman. By then, I had been a trial lawyer for twenty-seven (27) years with a very successful practice near Cedar Rapids. On a Monday morning in early May, I sent more than 200 emails, letters, and notes to clients, lawyers, judges and friends. I explained that I had long fought myself over my gender identity and that the woman inside me had won the battle. From that day on, I would present only as female and only be known as "Ellen." I gave my clients the opportunity to secure new counsel if this troubled them.

The reaction from my fellow Iowans was overwhelmingly positive. I immediately received phone calls, emails, and letters from supportive colleagues and clients. In particular, a man and a woman—two attorneys from a large Cedar Rapids law firm—called to congratulate me. They asked, "What can we do to help you?"

I was so touched.

Barely two months later, in July 2009, I tried what had to be the first jury trial by an openly transgender lawyer in Iowa history. I asked each jury member not to view me—a transgender person—as a reason to find against my clients. In turn, the jury promised they wouldn't hold me against my clients. After four days of trial, the jury came back in my clients' favor, just as I had hoped.

It was a magnificent victory moment and all that I could have dreamed of. It made me believe that yes, even as a woman with an incredibly deep voice, I could succeed as a trial attorney. As importantly, I now believed that my

law firm would survive and the four people who relied on me for their livelihoods and jobs would remain employed.

That was July, 2009. Unfortunately, by November—just four months later—many of my business clients had slowly walked away. The death knell for my firm came in early November when my biggest client called up out of the blue and ordered me to immediately cease all work on its files. It demanded that I deliver every one of its files to its home office by the end of that day.

That one phone call sounded the death knell of what had been the Krug Law Firm. By three months later—March 2010—I had laid off everyone and closed the firm. I then relocated to Minneapolis to start a new life—and an incredibly happy one—as a writer and nonprofit leader.

But, that's only a part of the story.

On the last Monday in November, 2009, a couple weeks after that sentinel phone call from my major client and after it became clear that my firm was lost, I received another telephone call. This one was from a Des Moines lawyer, someone who'd received my coming out letter six months prior. Again, it was another call out of the blue—I hadn't talked to this lawyer in months. We had had several cases together, and while we were very cordial with and liked each other, we weren't the type of friends who lunched or had drinks. Or picked up the phone to just shoot the breeze.

Here's how the call went.

Des Moines lawyer: *Ellen, I thought of you yesterday. How are you doing? How is it going?*

Me: *Well, it could be better. It looks like I'll have to close the firm.*

Des Moines lawyer: *I'm sorry to hear that Ellen. But are you okay?*

At this point, with me being a lawyer who's trained to pick up on things, I figured that something was up. I didn't know what, but certainly I wanted to reassure.

Me: *Yes, I'm okay. Despite all of the crap, I'm good. I have the one person I need; I have me, Ellie Krug.*

I sensed relief on the other end of the phone.

Des Moines lawyer: *That's good to hear Ellen. Real good to hear.*

We talked for a while about a case still on-going and life in general. The Des Moines lawyer then related the reason for his call: over the weekend, he'd heard about a transgender person named Christine Daniels who had committed suicide. Daniels had been a sports writer with the Los Angeles Times, who had transitioned from man to woman, and then back to man. Daniels had taken her life just a few days before the phone call. It had been the talk on the Sunday football shows.

Knowing me, the Des Moines lawyer became concerned. He decided to reach out. **He decided to care.** It was, in the end, a phone call I would remember for the rest of my life. And, it's been a phone call that I've now shared with thousands of people as I talk about my story.

Truth be told, I hadn't heard of Christine Daniels and didn't know anything about her very public transition or her struggles. Later, of course, I investigated. I learned that like me, she had been married, and like me, she loved her wife a great deal. I further learned that the wife rejected Christine as she transitioned. The wife then filed for divorce. The guilt and loss Christine suffered with losing her wife were so overwhelming that Christine did something that most transgender people who transition can't possibly fathom: she "de-transitioned," and went back to living as a man.

Unfortunately, that didn't bring back Christine's wife. And in the end, it only added to Christine's crippling depression. On the one year anniversary of Christine's divorce being finalized, Christine hooked a tube to the tailpipe of her Toyota Camry parked and running in her garage and got in the car. Someone later found her and tried CPR, but it was too late.

Christine Daniels was dead at age 52.

I will come back to the Des Moines lawyer's phone call at the end of this talk, but for now, please let me address the subject of suicide and how intertwined it is with transgender people.

First off, please understand that I know a thing or two about suicide. My father killed himself when I was 33 years old. He was alcoholic, depressed, and as I found out after his death, probably a bisexual sex-addict. Despite many pleas by family members—including me—my father never got help. Instead, he crawled into a bathtub one afternoon in January, 1990, and put a pistol into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

In doing that, my father lost so very much. There were grandchildren he'd never see; places he'd never go; and sobriety he'd never achieve. What a waste.

Just as Christine Daniels' death was a waste. And, of course, a tragedy.

Many of you know that the statistics for transgender people relative to suicide are staggering. The incidence of completed suicides for the general population is 12.1 persons per 100,000. Now, I'm going to mix up the numbers, so be warned. For trans people, that number of attempted suicides per 100 people is an astounding 41%. This is *attempts* and not actual suicides, but the two figures give you some sense of how prevalent suicide is for the trans community.

Indeed, I know this firsthand. For those of you who have read my book, you know that I idealized about the thin nylon rope that was part of my eight (8) person camping tent. I got to 4.75 on my 5.00 suicide scale, but stopped when I realized that killing myself would leave my two daughters feeling exactly how I felt about my father.

I broke a cycle. I'm so very lucky to be able to say that.

I realize that many times, Transgender Day of Remembrance focuses on those who have been killed or beaten or gone missing because of their status as transgender. We have the names imbedded in our collective memories: Brandon Teena, Larry King, Gwen Araujo. Or, for me and others in the Twin Cities, there is Krissy Bates, who was the first person murdered in Minneapolis in

2011. The police listed only her male name. That's the case from which I learned the phrase "overkill:" where someone continues to slash away at a body long after death has resulted---all because of anger and rage.

We know this date—as I said it's "sacred"---stems from the 1998 beating to death of Rita Hester in Boston. We've documented the murders of trans people ever since. Last night I looked at the primary website that tallies the deaths of trans persons. For the twelve months since a year ago, the website listed seventy (70) deaths, many of them in the overkill category, and many of them South America. However, that continent has no monopoly—trans people were murdered across the world, including in the United States.

By no means do I want to diminish or marginalize or forget the ultimate sacrifice so many have made all because they simply wanted to live their lives as themselves. They should and must be remembered and honored on this day.

Yet, we don't talk enough about trans people—and for that matter the other alphabet letters, the L's, G's, B's, and Q's, or further about the other humans who don't have an alphabet letter—who time and again leave this world through their own hands, their own devices. It is its own separate tragedy of epidemic proportions. Indeed, the national suicide rate now surpasses the number of people killed in car accidents.

Just last week, a 16 year old Brainerd, Minnesota high school student killed himself when he was suspected of being attracted to an openly gay fellow student.

So, let us ask **why** in general, but more particularly, **why do trans people attempt and then succeed at suicide in such high numbers?**

Why do we hate ourselves so very much that death—the utter nothingness of death—seems the only viable option? Why do we feel we have no choice about whether to live or die? How is it that we have a society that nurtures pets—cats, dogs and exotic fish—to the tune of billions of dollars a year but yet can't find it within its collective self to nurture humans who are simply seeking to live their lives authentically and genuinely?

For starters, there's **fear**.

We're human, which means that fear is part of our everyday existence. We need to understand that. We also need to realize that fear is the root cause of so many negative things, and the genesis for much of the hatred in this world.

For most trans people, fear is endemic to our lives. Growing up, I was the poster child relative to fear. I lived in an alcoholic household with a father who often went missing. I vividly recall laying in my bed until midnight, or one or two in the morning, scared to death, waiting to hear the moan of the garage door and rumble of the Oldsmobile, meaning that my dead drunk father had made it home yet again.

On a few nights, he didn't make it home. By the time I was a college freshman, I learned what the phrases "arraignment" and "presentence investigation" meant.

Rippling from that was yet more fear—that I'd never be able to survive in the world alone. This fueled a tremendous insecurity and lack of self-confidence. When I pictured myself as an adult, it was hard to imagine me as successful—I saw only a loser, someone who'd never be able to achieve much.

Most of all, fear worked to keep me from understanding my true self. Because I was so afraid, I spent all of my energy on simply trying to survive as a boy, and then a man. Never mind that from age eight or so, I had gut tugs pulling at me, telling me that I was different. Never mind that I started wearing girl's underwear at age eleven (11) or that as a teenager, I began fantasizing about same sex attractions and being adored as a woman by men.

All of that was too, too big. I was scared to death that if I opened the bottle, turned on the tap, my gender genie would gush forth, and I'd lose any chance for a successful life.

I know that these thoughts—this stuffing, compartmentalizing, suffering—are all too common for trans people. These are our fears. They are what holds us back.

**And for many, it's also what kills us.**

I know, though, there's even more fear out there, plenty of fear to go around. For many trans people in our country—and that includes my dear home state, Iowa—there's a pronounced fear of being hurt or killed if we ever let that genie out of the bottle, if we ever lived as our true selves, genetic males who really are female, like Krissy Bates I've spoken of, or genetic females who are really male, like Brandon Teena.

That oppression wears on you. And god forbid, if the secret comes out—god forbid, if a closeted transwoman does something so normal as wear painted nails in public—there's the fear.

*Will someone hurt me for this? Who will yell at me because of this? Will I lose my apartment or job over wearing pink nails?*

On the other side of the fear equation, there are the hate mongers, the ignorant people who fail to even recognize their common humanity. Consider the November 7 issue of **Rolling Stone Magazine**, and Sabrina Rubin Erdely's story about Coy Mathis, a six year old who made Colorado history because her parents successfully fought for elementary school bathroom access (Coy, genetically male, has identified as female since the earliest age). Erdely writes about those who hate us:

*"Is that not the craziest thing you've ever heard," Mike Huckabee asked at October's right-wing Values Voter Summit, speaking of California's anti-discrimination law [requiring bathroom and locker room access for gender variant students]; California Republicans have already targeted its repeal as a top priority. Earlier this year, House Republicans tried to strip the Violence Against Women Act of its protections for transgender women, and Arizona state Rep. John Kavanaugh introduced a bill that would have made it a crime for trans people to use their preferred bathrooms. Fox News commentators vehemently*

oppose any accommodation of trans kids in schools, something Bill O'Reilly calls 'anarchy and madness.'"

Throw in for good measure one more historical fact: trans people aren't protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act because North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms believed trans people were an abomination, like pedophiles.

Thankfully, Jesse Helms is gone. I wish that his bigotry was too. It's that bigotry that accounts for why transgender people have legal protections in only eighteen (18) states, including Washington, D.C. Within the last three weeks, I've spoken in both Ohio and Missouri, states where trans people have absolutely no legal rights. Kansas, next door to Missouri (for those of you who failed United States geography) actually passed a LGBT protection law, only to then have it repealed by popular vote.

Can you imagine feeling safe and legal one day, and then waking up the next to find that you've become an outlaw? Think about it; that society suddenly says, "you're not good enough to protect. You're not one of us."

As a trans person, my response to all of this public demeaning is "What have I done to you?" "Why can you not simply leave me alone?" "Why do you have to diminish me or target me?" Or the extreme, "Why do you want to kill me?"

And yet again, the answer is fear. Trans people who transition make other people uncomfortable. Non-trans folks don't know how to react. Confused and unwilling to consider alternative perspectives, they believe we're sexual deviants. Many people consider us crazy—"what do you mean that have to wear a dress? You've been wearing men's shirts for 40 years; why after all that time, do you have to wear that Donna Karan sleeveless dress? In January with two feet of snow on the ground?

For many, fear translates to attacks, verbal and physical. And of course, when you have national figures egging people on, it's so much easier for others to view trans people as less than 100 percent human. That makes it a whole lot easier to harm or kill us.

***It also makes it a lot easier for trans people to kill themselves.***

I haven't even started on the idea that many transphobic people actually harbor their own gender variant secrets. Can you imagine Bill O'Reilly in a cute sky blue Ann Klein jumper with matching pill box hat and shoes?

Hmmm. Let's hold that image for a moment. Now that would be a reason to tune into Fox.

Let me offer another reason why trans people kill themselves in so many greater percentages than the rest of society. It has to do with **God**—however you want to define him or her.

Again, much of the fear mongering I quoted above is rooted in the idea that a person's "Quote-Unquote Gender" is God-given. Indeed, one of my best friends from Coe College, upon learning that I was transgender, asked if I was contemplating surgery. When I told him indeed I was, he immediately

responded that surgery was just plain wrong—that the “science” around gender identity was very shaky and that I didn’t have the right to tinker with what God had given me for a body.

It was a pretty remarkable statement considering that my fellow Coe graduate was a well-respected psychiatrist.

What trans person would want to be treated for gender dysphoria by him?

So, we trans people have fear and religious-fueled intolerance to contend with. There are other factors that lend to our own self-hatred—the society-instilled idea that we can “choose” our gender; a complete and total lack of therapeutic and medical resources in many parts of the country; and for many, a lack of medical insurance that would make it easier to treat depression.

Yet, there is one more key factor for our self-hatred, for what fuels our overwhelming depression.

**Loss.** The people and things we lose by coming out as trans.

In my case, I swore that I wouldn’t hurt Lydia, my soul mate, the love of my life. We started out as high school sweethearts, and before it was over, we’d been together for thirty-two (32) years. For a long time as I secretly struggled with my gender issues, the idea of taking my own life—of checking out without anyone ever knowing about my struggle—seemed like a far better option compared to breaking Lydia’s heart (and the hearts of my children) and the divorce and hurt that would follow.

But then I thought about my father, about his suicide, and how being a suicide survivor can be an overwhelming burden in itself. I know what it means to clean up after someone has killed himself. I know firsthand the questions—*why did he do it? Didn’t he love us enough to get help?* And most of all, the big super-duper suicide survivor questions: ***Was there something that I did to cause it, or could I have done something differently to have prevented it?***

Am I the only person in the room touched by suicide? Who else in this room has had family members or loved ones or friends suffer self-harm?

*Look around. Those are the people we need to honor on this Transgender Remembrance Day.* It doesn’t matter if only one or none of those suicide victims was transgender.

The reason it doesn’t matter: All of those victims—along with all trans people who take their own lives—have one thing in common.

They were ***human. Living, breathing, suffering, loving, hurting, humans. Worthy of life regardless of gender or sexual orientations. Worthy of love and happiness and respect.***

***Fear, religious fanaticism, loss and a host of other reasons are why we have this Day of Remembrance.***

I could go on and on and on about all of the challenges, all of the darkness that trans people face. But that’s not why I’m here. That’s not the reason I drove 200 miles and spent the entire day in Ames.

Life is to be lived, not simply endured.

No. I'm not all about doom and gloom. That was me as a man.

As Ellie Krug, I'm about hope. And compassion. And loving kindness toward one's self and others.

So please let me report from the other side of the fence, from the other end of the bridge, like some messenger from the front lines—whatever metaphor you want to use.

***It is better living as your true self.*** It's not perfect—nothing in life is a panacea—but it's a whole lot better. Light years better. A thousand gold stars better. A 4.0 grade on top of a 4.0 grade on top of a 4.0 grade, better.

The voice in my head, “you need to live your own life” is gone. The gut tugs pulling at me to stop masquerading as a man are gone. I am living an authentic life and that one fact is both quite wonderful and extraordinary. When I look at my body now, I see a woman, the real me. I have this incredible sense of completeness. **And all of the compartments, all of the boxes I had put myself in, are gone.**

As I talk to other trans people who've transitioned, I hear the very same thing: yes, it was hell to get here, but thank goodness we were able to do it.

I also don't mean to imply that everyone has to surgically transition to be complete. Not at all—the statistics are that only 15-20 percent of trans people transition surgically. That number is slowly increasing as more health insurance covers gender reassignment surgery, but the fact is that most trans people never have surgery.

Instead, what I mean is that trans people should have the right to get to where they need, where they want, on the gender expression spectrum. They should be accorded the right to live their lives free of harassment. Free of violence. Free of death, by others or by their own hand.

What does it take to get to this place of completeness?

Some luck, for sure. A lot of hard work too. A lot of believing in one's self when others don't. I could talk about all of that for hours, too—and I'll spare you.

No, for me, getting to Ellen, living post-transition, took one more essential thing--it took me finally saying that I am worth the effort. It took me moving from hating myself to loving myself.

And that, my friends, is really the crux of my message. The bullies of the world tell us that we're freaks or worse. ***Please hear me as I shout from the top of my lungs: do not allow those words to settle in! Do not let them melt your psyche! Or crush your heart! Close your ears and eyes to the hatred! Repel all negativity with every ounce of your spirit!***

Instead, remember that you are a human being worthy of breathing the same air, drinking from the same water, and walking the same roads as anyone else. We all deserve the right to live our lives genuinely and authentically.

Easy words to utter, Ellie Krug. ***But tell us really, how does a trans person— young or closeted or scared to death—ever get to loving one's self, ever get to self-compassion?***

My answer is three words: **honesty, kindness, and gratitude.**

Let me address the first—**honesty**.

For much of my life, I thought I could choose my gender. I thought I could choose to stay a boy, and then a man. I believed that if I only did X or Y, my gender gut tugs would go away. I believed that if I worked just a bit harder, sacrificed a bit more, I could stay married to Lydia, the love of my life. I told several of my therapists this—“I’m not here for you to help me figure out myself; instead, I want you to give to give me the right strategy to put up with being a man.”

Of course, I was completely, totally, and absolutely, wrong.

In reality, those gut tugs weren’t tugs at all. They were punches and pokes from the inside. The female who roamed within my spirit was desperately trying to come out. As long as I lied to myself, she never saw daylight.

However, once I stopped lying—once I understood **there is no choice** here—everything opened up. I felt **freedom** for the very first time in my life.

It was like trying a new flavored milkshake with the best and most delicious ice cream. Oh my god, I didn’t know something could taste that unbelievably good!

The process of coming out as our true selves is nothing more—or less—than the net result of honest reflection. It’s the product of laying in our beds wide awake night after night, month after month, year after year, with a pounding away at our souls. Where we stop lying to ourselves about choice or whatever else you want to call it. Where we simply say, “Enough. This is who I am.”

**Honesty begets freedom. Freedom gives you strength. The strength to endure. The strength to do the hard work of living a full life.**

**Honesty also gives you the strength to say “hell no!” to thoughts about suicide. And the strength to ignore the bullies and Bill O’Reilly’s of the world.**

My second word—**kindness**.

It’s such a simple concept, kindness. It’s nothing more than sharing our common humanity, reveling in it, and being open to others. We learn the power of kindness within seconds of our birth—a nurse’s touch, a mother’s cooing, a heartfelt welcoming into the world. Preschool teachers instill kindness—“Everyone needs to share.” Kindness can be as simple as giving a street musician a spare buck or hugging someone hurting. It can be a simple question: “Are you okay? Would you like to talk?” Or, it can be as grand as traveling across the world to assist typhoon victims.

Let me share an example of bullying being met by extreme kindness.

Twice within the last month, there have been national news stories about restaurant servers being refused tips because their customers believed the servers were gay. One incident happened in Kansas City; the other in New Jersey. In both instances, neither server had even hinted to the customers about their sexual orientation.

The most recent incident happened just a week ago. CNN reported that the New Jersey server, a twenty-two (22) year old woman and former Marine, introduced herself as “Dayna,” to the customers—a man and woman and two

girls. According to the news report, the woman in the group looked at Dayna and responded "I thought you were going to say your name is 'Dan.'"

Obviously, the woman was reacting to how Dayna dressed and appeared—something that we T people understand all too well.

The customers left Dayna no tip for a \$93 bill and instead wrote on the check, "I'm sorry but I cannot tip because I do not agree with what your lifestyle [is] and how you live your life."

Dayna wrote about this on Facebook. A group called "Have a Gay Day," picked it up and the story went viral. From there—in less than two days, people started sending Dayna tips. The tips have come in from across the world—Germany, South Africa, England, San Diego. By the time CNN had reported it, Dayna had received over \$2000, money that she was going to donate to the Wounded Warriors Project.

There was a similar outpouring of support for the Kansas City restaurant server. People lined up at the restaurant and waited hours just for the opportunity to be served by him and to generously tip him.

The power of human kindness. Each person who reached out in these situations represents someone saying, "you're okay Dayna. You're simply a human making your way through the world."

Yet, over time, we forget the power of kindness. The idea that we should do something for others out of our common humanity becomes displaced. We live in a world which messages that selfishness, greed and power bring rewards. Where it's better to hunker down alone than it is to reach out to others.

Kindness toward others is crucial, yes. But there's another type of kindness that I want to focus on, too—**the act of being kind to ourselves**. Where we give ourselves a break. Where we stop measuring our worth against the worth of others. Where the number of Facebook friends someone has isn't a defining point for whether or not we're worthy. Or whether that invite to the Friday night party comes through.

**Kindness to ourselves—self-compassion—is core to living an authentic life.**

I was at a wedding last week where the minister spoke of "love" as necessitating that one spouse—the wife—love the other spouse—her husband—more than herself. I wanted to jump up and shout, "Hold on, you've got it all wrong!"

Of course, I didn't. Despite rumors about my outspokenness, I'm not that crazy-assertive. Besides, it was my niece's wedding and my brother wouldn't have been pleased by my making a social statement just at the precise moment.

Seriously, though, think about what I'm saying here, please. We have to love ourselves more than anyone else. I'm not talking selfishness or greed or narcissism. **Instead, I'm saying we have to do the hard work of accepting who we are, and being okay with it.**

Often, we can't get to loving ourselves without help. I went through seven (7) or eight (8) therapists—remember those therapy licenses I earned in 22

states—before I found the one therapist who helped me love Ellen Krug. I call her “Sam the Hammer” in my book because she wouldn’t let me off the hook. She pushed and pushed and pushed until I realized that loving me was more important than loving anyone else. In fact, it’s impossible to genuinely love someone else without you first loving yourself, and having self-compassion.

I’ve covered honesty and kindness. Now let me tackle that third word, **gratitude**.

When I lived as a man, I had everything anyone could want—a beautiful loving wife, two great daughters, a house in the best neighborhood, a money-making law practice—even a fancy BMW. Yet, I didn’t have the one thing I needed more than anything else—I didn’t have **me, Ellen Krug**.

Despite all of those things, and all of the immense love by others, I was never at peace, never happy. I knew that I should feel extremely grateful, but I just couldn’t get there.

Today, I drive a nearly four year old Honda. I live paycheck to paycheck. I’m alone, without a romantic relationship. In all likelihood, when I die, I will be alone.

And I am extremely grateful for all that I have. **I am grateful that I can live my life as my own self, no longer an imposter as a man.**

That great social philosopher of the ages—Oprah Winfrey—has said, “Be thankful for what you have; you’ll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don’t have, you will never, ever have enough.”

So very true. I’d put it a different way: Living your truth allows others to live their own truths.

Neuroscientists have discovered that living with gratitude both opens one’s heart to the world and activates positive emotion centers in the brain. In other words, being grateful can help us to live a healthier life. It will also lead to compassion for others—and that’s where I’m going with this.

It’s quite impossible to have compassion for anyone else if we don’t have compassion for ourselves. Gratitude is a key component of self-compassion—it gives us the perspective to know that others are hurting. Gratitude helps us understand the power of touch, the power of reaching out.

**Gratitude allows us to show up for others.** When we do so, we work to end the suffering of others.

Let me offer one more thought about the power of gratitude: it keeps us from running away from those who we’ve lost as we’ve made our way to living authentic lives. As many in this room know, not everyone wants to take our gender journeys with us. Some refuse. Some turn their backs or disown. Some yell or scream at us.

Our natural inclination is to hurt or anger and to close our hearts. Instead, living with gratitude allows one to remain open and wait for that person. Perhaps they will come back around. Maybe someday they will understand and come back to you and again be a part of your life.

**Gratitude gives us the strength and wisdom to remain open.**

For those of you in this room, on this Transgender Day of Remembrance, it is gratitude that brings us together—our collective gratitude that we're alive, that we're making it, and the recognition that we are all human, living and breathing the same air. In that sense, this sacred day represents something other than death or loss. It represents the hope that someday, through compassion and kindness, maybe all transgender people will be able to live authentic and fulfilling lives anywhere in the world.

Maybe someday, there will no longer be websites dedicated to documenting the trans people who've been murdered in the past year.

Now let me go back to that Des Moines lawyer's extraordinary phone call after Christine Daniels' suicide.

What would cause someone to reach out like that? After all, the Des Moines lawyer didn't know how I'd react. He had no clue as to whether I'd be offended. Worse yet, what if I was suicidal like Christine? He could have a real mess on his hands; the phone call could go on and on as I cried and hurt.

Even with all of those risks, that Des Moines lawyer picked up the telephone and dialed me. I call it "going into the gray," doing something that risks making another person uncomfortable, and yet still doing it.

Why?

Because the Des Moines lawyer understood that all of us are human, that invariably we are interconnected. That each of us has value unto our own selves.

As far as I know, that Des Moines lawyer wasn't gay or trans or any other alphabet letter. He was barely even a friend. Yet, he picked up the phone and called.

***Because to him, I mattered. Because he believed I was worth all the risks inherent in making such a call. Because he cared about me.***

I challenge all of you in this room to dedicate yourselves to going into the gray for other people. I challenge you to not fear awkwardness or discomfort or uncertainty when a person—any human being, a friend, a family member or even a complete stranger—is hurting.

I challenge you to reach out to others because reaching out, going into the gray, is the epitome of compassion. Give that person a kind word, a hand on the shoulder, or five minutes of your time to sit and talk.

Reaching out is the essence of being human.

It's proof that another human being matters to you. Further, reaching out may help someone else to decide that living is better than dying. They may think that if someone else believes I matter, maybe I should too.

Reaching out can save someone's life. The ripple effect can be that profound.

**Please know that all of you matter to me.** My fellow Iowans, all of you should matter to one another.

It is what we owe each other as humans. It is the sheer power of compassion.

Thank you for your kind attention tonight. I wish you all the very best as you go forward in life.

### **Contact Information**

Ellen (Ellie) Krug

[elliekrug@gmail.com](mailto:elliekrug@gmail.com)

[www.elliekrug.com](http://www.elliekrug.com)

[www.gettingtoellen.com](http://www.gettingtoellen.com)

Twitter@elliekrug

Follow me on Facebook (Ellie Krug)

319-360-1692