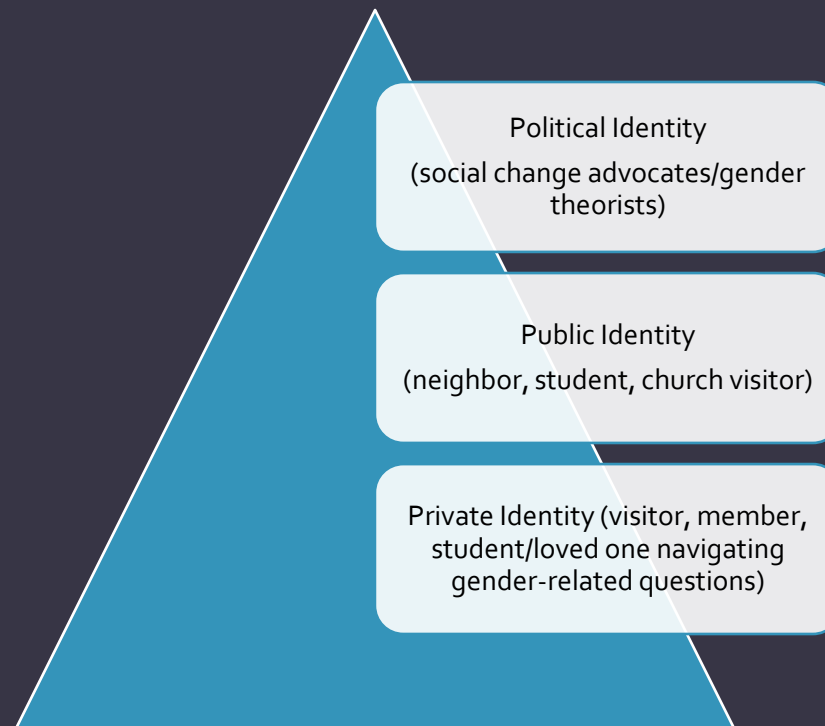


# GENDER IDENTITY AND FAITH: IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

Julia Sadusky, PsyD

# 3 LEVELS OF IDENTITY & ENGAGEMENT



# WHAT TO AVOID

Oversimplifying the theories of causation related to complex topics such as sexuality and gender

Oversimplifying/jaded responses to questions

- Avoid "catch-phrases" such as, "God doesn't make mistakes," "They are delusional," "If that were my kid..."

Putting forth rigid norms of sex and gender as the standard of holiness

Dehumanizing the conversation through talking about "issues" over people

Othering by our language: "them/those people"

# PRINCIPLES FOR ROBUST CONVERSATION

## Foster Curiosity

- What a great question! Let's think together about that more. Avoid black-and white thinking. Avoid tone that connotes the answer is obvious.

## Reflective Listening and Mirroring

- Tentative Tone [while repeating back content of what was said]
- Did I hear you right?
- What would you tweak?

## Open up Dialogue About Ideas

- What do you think about that?
- Invite future conversation.
- Follow-up with those who may be wrestling more with this than others.

## Expect a range of reactions to conversation

# 01

Model humility even when you “know the answer.”

Say so when you aren’t sure of the answer.

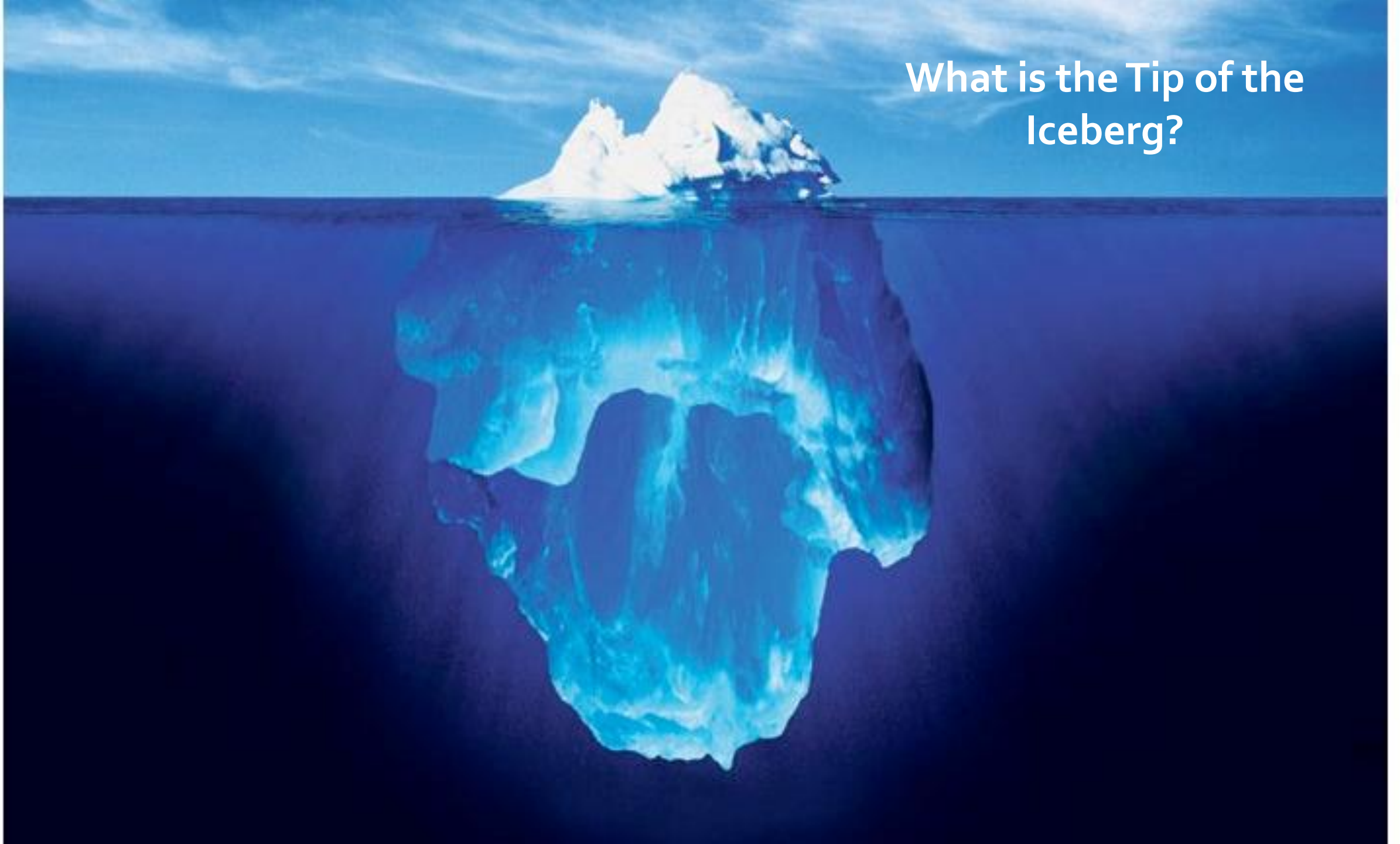
# 02

Avoid presenting purely a theology of “no’s” [Eve Tushnet]

# 03

Challenge derogatory comments boldly and calmly. “That’s not how we talk about people.”

What is the Tip of the  
Iceberg?



# Gender Atypical Behavior/Interests/Name/Pronouns

An iceberg floating in a blue ocean under a blue sky. The tip of the iceberg is visible above the water, while the much larger, submerged part is visible below the surface. The text is overlaid on the submerged part of the iceberg.

Spiritual questions

*"What does God think about me?"*

*"Does God love me?"*

Questions about identity

Questions about intimacy

*"How will my needs for intimacy be met?"*

Questions about community

*"Am I wanted here?"*

*"Do I belong?"*



The background of the slide is a grayscale photograph of a tall building under construction. The entire structure is enveloped in a dense, intricate network of scaffolding, creating a complex geometric pattern of lines. The building's form is partially visible through the mesh of the scaffolding. The image is used as a background for the title and subtitle text.

# HELPING PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Scaffolding, Gender Patience  
& Exploration



## Scaffolding, Gender Patience & Exploration

Parental scaffolding will be most emotionally and spiritually safe when parents are able to name their fears and work through those fears in supportive spaces.

Scaffolding can also involve generous supportive comments, expressions of unconditional love and acceptance, teachable moments, appropriate limit-setting or re-direction, and safety-planning for interactions with the child's peer group.

Help the child channel their interests and talents in a way that offers community, identity, and a sense of mastery of an aspect of their life, even while gender identity may be a point of tension.

Scaffolding, Gender Patience  
& Exploration

Connect parents with supportive group environments where they could learn from other parents who are on (or have recently been on) similar journeys with a child.

Center for Faith Sexuality and Gender

Revoice

Embracing the Journey

<https://www.embracingthejourney.org/>

# ACCEPTING VS. REJECTING BEHAVIORS

## Rejecting behaviors include:

- Causing physical harm to a child who is exploring gender
- Name-calling, verbal aggression to a child who is exploring gender
- Isolating a child from family events because of their gender
- Blaming a child for bullying or harassment they encounter
- Pressuring a child to engage in gender-typical behaviors that are rooted in stereotypes
- Highlighting that God will punish a child because of their gender (i.e. "you will go to hell...")
- Communicating that you are ashamed of your child for their gender questions
- Telling a child to not tell anyone even if the child wants to, so the child is left to explore gender without support (adapted from Renna, 2009)



# ACCEPTING VS. REJECTING BEHAVIORS

## Accepting behaviors include:

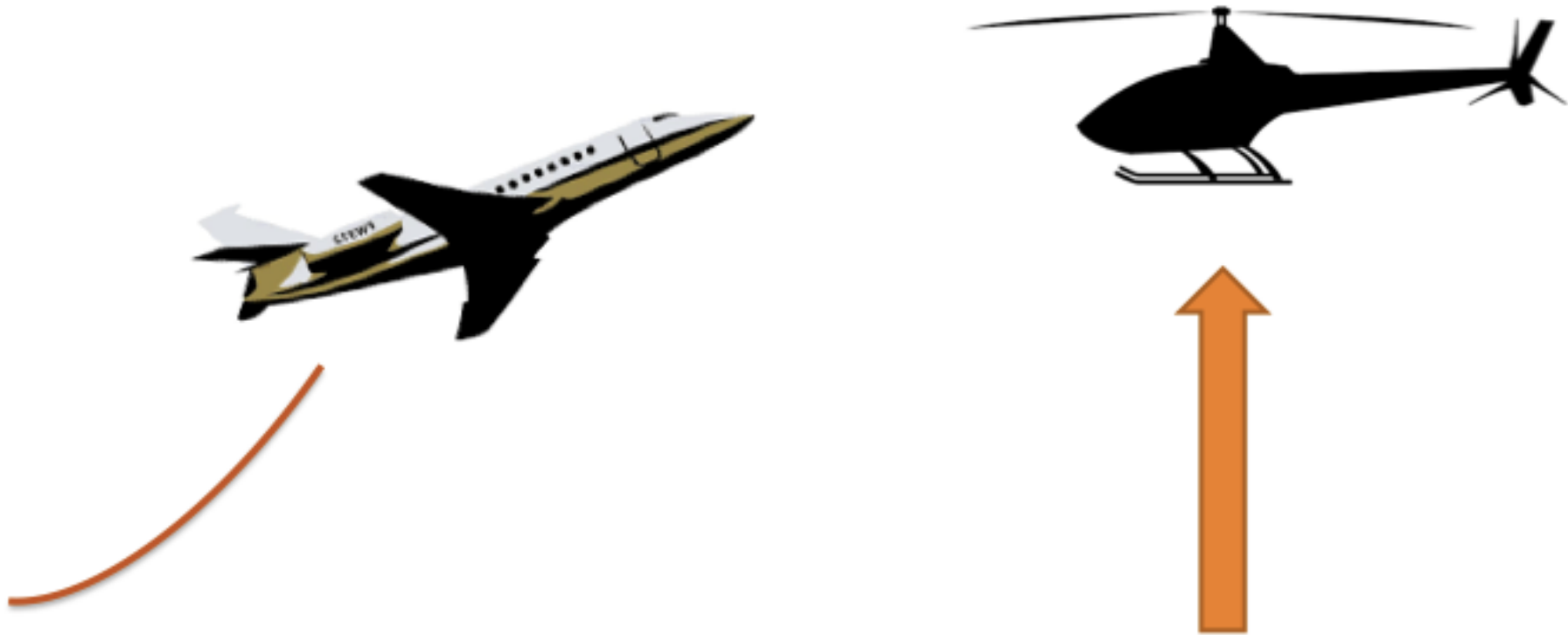
- Talk with your child or foster child about their gender identity
- Express affection when your child tells you or when you learn that your child is transgender
- Support your child's transgender identity even though you may feel uncomfortable
- Advocate for your child when he or she is mistreated because of their transgender identity
- Require that other family members respect your child
- Bring your child to transgender organizations or events
- Talk with clergy and help your faith community to support transgender people
- Connect your child with an transgender adult role model to show them options for the future
- Welcome your child's friends & partners to your home
- Support your child's gender expression and believe your child can have a happy future as a transgender adult (adapted from Renna, 2009)



ADOLESCENTS & ADULTS

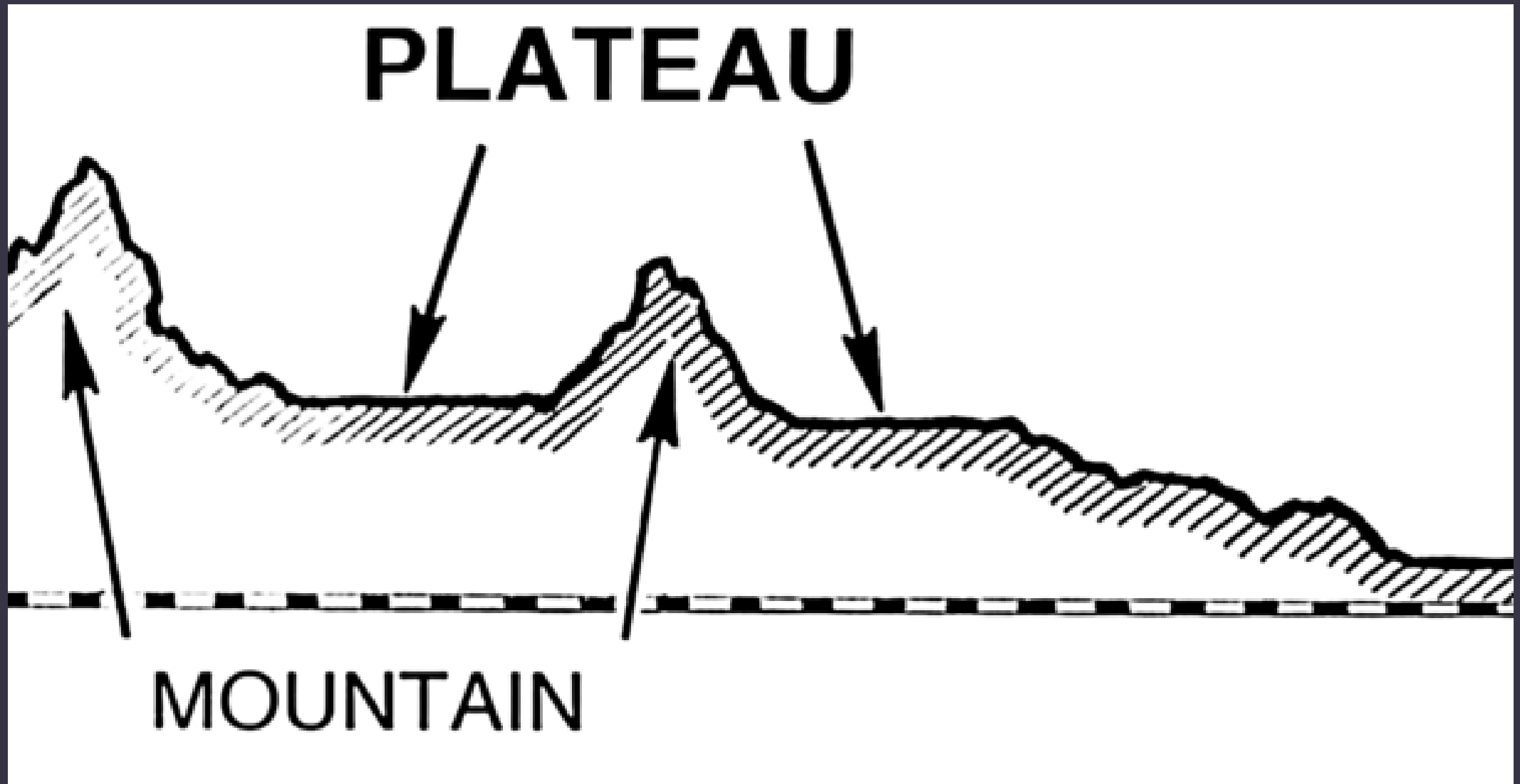
# Working with Parents / Families

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# NAME AND PRONOUNS



# PLATEAU

25% having any type of GCS

44% reported use of HT

84% used preferred pronouns

62% had transitioned FT

22% wanted to transition

13% not sure if they wanted to transition

# MOUNTAIN

21% lived as neither a man nor a woman

15% lived PT in one gender and PT in another

3% did not want to transition

# Management Strategies

**“Helping other people—  
focusing on the problems  
of others. I was created to  
love God and love people.  
God made me generous  
and empathic and that’s  
what matters.”**

**“The single most important coping  
activity is not so much an activity; it’s  
that my family believes me.”**

**“It wasn’t until I got home and was journaling to God  
that night that I started to cry. ‘I want to be normal,’ I  
told Him. “I don’t want to be proud of my identity. I  
just want to be normal. Oh God, I want to be normal.’  
If there was a plan for me to be this way, why do I feel  
scared to be this way? I don’t have an answer to that  
question.”**

Awareness: Disclosure/Discovery

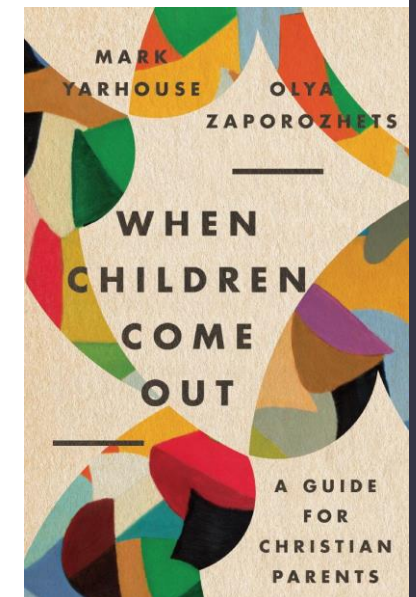
Attributional search for meaning,  
identity, community

## Child Navigating Sexual or Gender Identity



## Parents Navigating Terrain Post-Awareness

“Worldview” response; ambiguous loss;  
emotional distress; situational stressors



# AMBIGUOUS LOSS



Ambiguous loss is more of a “free-floating” sense of something not being the way a parent thought it would be.

It is a vague sense of loss that isn’t so much directed at your child or at God or at anyone in particular, which can sometimes make it hard to name and hard to work through.



# EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Early in the awareness experiences, common feelings of confusion, anger, frustration, guilt, and so on.

Emotional distress is related to concerns:

- ✧ Concerns tied to safety, negative social attitudes, prejudice, and harassment
- ✧ Concern for the future and worry that their child will have a harder life (being lonely or unhappy)
- ✧ Concern that their child will not have children, meaning that the parent will not have grandchildren
- ✧ Self-blame and belief that they have failed as parents
- ✧ Concern that their child will lose their religious faith
- ✧ Conflict between the parent's love of their child and their religious beliefs and values



## Awareness: Disclosure/Discovery

"Worldview" response; ambiguous loss;  
emotional distress; situational stressors

# Parent-Child Relationship Post-Disclosure



- Conflict
- Anger

Increases initially,  
decreases over time

Decreases initially,  
increases over time

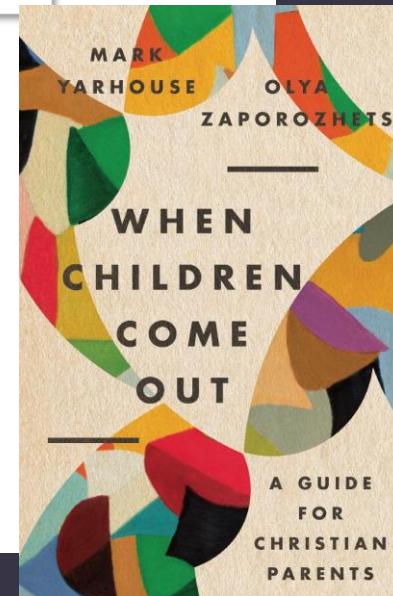
- Emotional closeness
- Communication
- Engagement
- Authenticity
- Acceptance

- Protectiveness

Grows over time

Coming to Terms with Reality

Cognitive, emotional,  
spiritual foundations



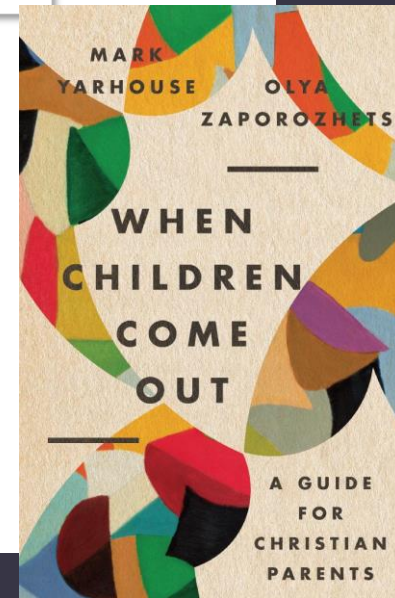
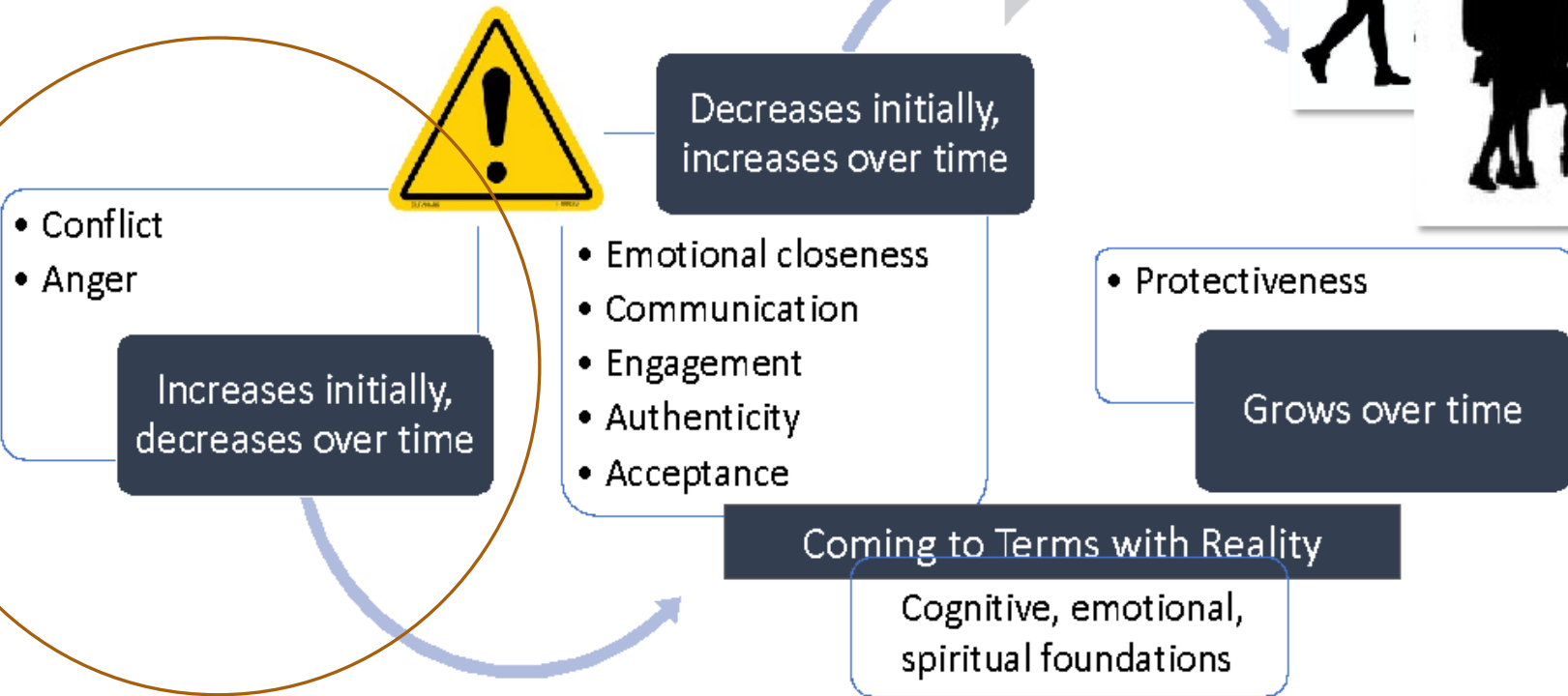


QUESTIONS

## Awareness: Disclosure/Discovery

"worldview" response; ambiguous loss;  
emotional distress; situational stressors

# Parent-Child Relationship Post-Disclosure



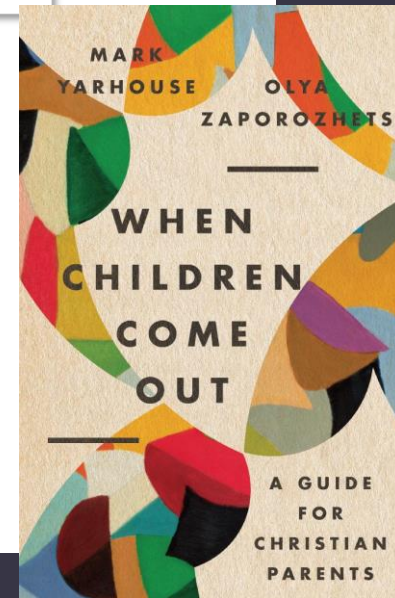
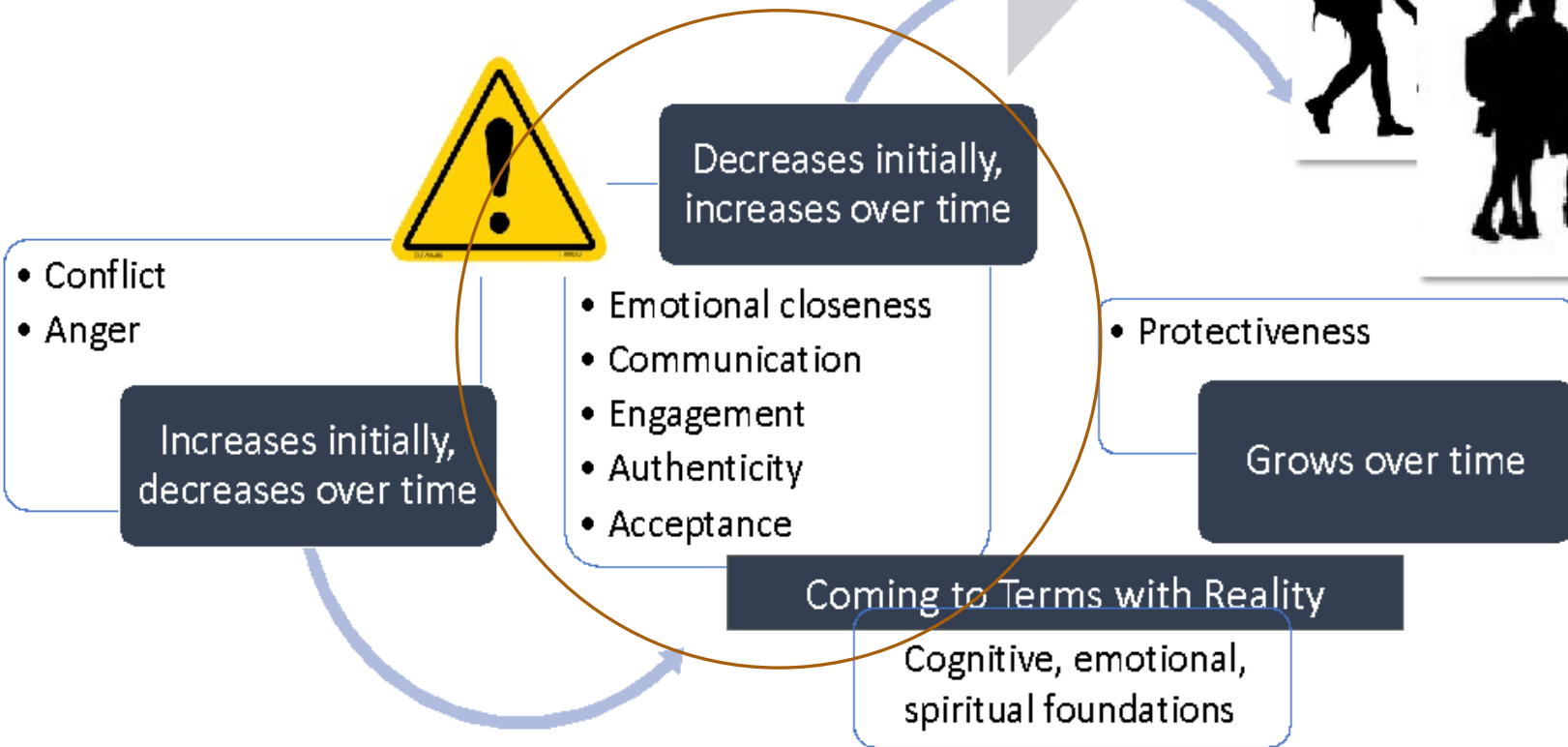
## FOR EXAMPLE: CONFLICT

Oh my gosh. It was very tumultuous. I could never seem to say the right things. She was always angry at me. We were both hurt. She would say stuff to hurt me. Of course, I thought I was always right. We were just hurting each other. It was not good.

## Awareness: Disclosure/Discovery

"Worldview" response; ambiguous loss;  
emotional distress; situational stressors

# Parent-Child Relationship Post-Disclosure





## FOR EXAMPLE: DECREASED EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS

“That was the worst my relationship had ever been with [my son] as a mom. I knew he was lying. I knew that things were not adding up. You know in your gut as a mom when he says he’s somewhere and he’s not. We just knew it. This kid that never lied in his life, (so transparent), was lying, so our relationship started drifting further and further apart. This kid who was very demonstrative and touchy feely started pushing away from everyone, even his sister who he’s extremely close to now. During that phase it was as if he was trying to get away. [It was] very, very difficult.”

## Awareness: Disclosure/Discovery

"Worldview" response; ambiguous loss;  
emotional distress; situational stressors

# Parent-Child Relationship Post-Disclosure



- Conflict
- Anger

Increases initially,  
decreases over time

Decreases initially,  
increases over time

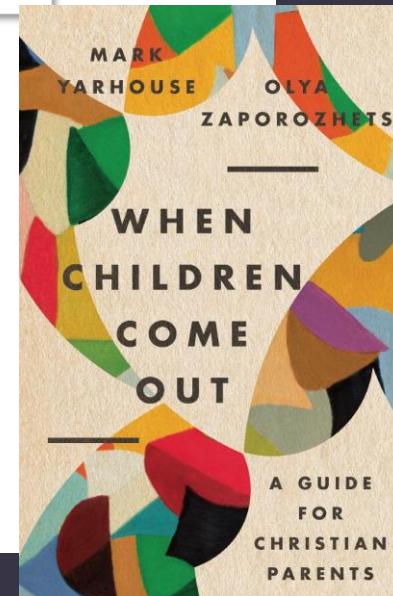
- Emotional closeness
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- Protectiveness

Grows over time

Coming to Terms with Reality

Cognitive, emotional,  
spiritual foundations



# COMING TO TERMS WITH REALITY

Coming to terms with reality – what does this mean?

As your relationship with your child changes over time, initial challenges subside and a different way of relating emerges, a “new normal”

You can think of it three ways:

- ↳ Cognitive,
- ↳ Emotional, and
- ↳ Spiritual changes

# COGNITIVE (HOW YOU THINK) CHANGES

Cognitive or how you think about your circumstances

Parents make adjustments here over time

Key: *Parents move from confusion to insight*

Can be measured by self-talk



# EMOTIONAL CHANGES

The emotional adjustments made over time fall into two broad categories.

Adjustments to reduce conflict and negative emotional experiences

Also growth in positive emotional experiences such as love, emotional closeness, and engagement, as well as in their experience of authenticity with their child.



# SPIRITUAL CHANGES

Facing circumstances that a person has no control over often causes that person to develop greater dependence on God.

Over time: a greater capacity for trusting in God and for hope when they do not know or understand the future.

These foundations also inform next steps.

Important spiritual questions may remain in your mind.





## Awareness: Disclosure/Discovery

"Worldview" response; ambiguous loss;  
emotional distress; situational stressors

# Parent-Child Relationship Post-Disclosure

- Conflict
- Anger

Increases initially,  
decreases over time



Decreases initially,  
increases over time

- Emotional closeness
- Communication
- Engagement
- Authenticity
- Acceptance

- Protectiveness

Grows over time

Coming to Terms with Reality

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