

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**They/Them/Their: We Contain Multitudes***By James G. Leipold*

**I**t's 2020 y'all, and we have to get used to the singular use of the English pronoun they and all of its derivatives — them, their, theirs, and themselves — whether we want to or not. It may take some thought, and some practice, but it should roll off our tongues as naturally as he or she.

*Any suggestions for a vegan lunch spot nearby? Marti is coming in for an interview on Tuesday and they've let us know that they are vegan.*

As legal career professionals, it's our professional responsibility to master this, even if it takes some work. I'll be the first to say that while I understand the usage intellectually and emotionally, as a cisgender white male of a certain age who was also an English major at university, I find that my identity as a gay man is often at war with the grammarian inside me, and thus it takes real effort on my part to get this right. But when Marti has indicated that their pronouns are they/them/their, I need to use them both when I'm with Marti and when I'm not. Modeling the right pronoun usage for others in your office will help everyone get comfortable with this evolution of English language usage.

*Marti is coming in for a callback next week and I am hopeful that it goes well. I really enjoyed meeting them at OCI and I think they would be an awesome member of our tax team.*

Some cursory etymologic research reveals that the singular use of *they* actually emerged in the 14th century

and has been in use ever since. Historically it has been used when the noun that precedes the pronoun is not specific. For instance: "Somebody left their cellphone in the conference room. I'm sure they will come back for it." The gender of the person who left the cellphone is unknown, and common usage of the plural *they* rather than the awkward "he or she" is readily accepted and sounds right to our ear. But it was not until the early 21st century that the use of *they* for those who do not identify as male or female emerged, as in the examples with the vegan Marti above. Now, 20 years into the new century, it has become an established usage. In fact, *they* in this context was named Word of the Year for 2019 by Merriam-Webster, so we are on notice and have no excuses for getting this wrong.

*Thanks for reminding me about that vegan place on 19th street. I want Marti to know we thought about their food preferences.*

I was walking through some early morning fog and damp here in Washington, DC, right after the new year, heading toward the AALS conference hotel, mulling on this and other things as I sipped my steaming coffee trying to order my thoughts for the day, when I had a small insight that has been helpful to me in reconciling the warring LGBT and grammar sides of my brain. Let me try to explain, as maybe it will be helpful to you too.

My brain has 58 years of training and experience and enculturation that makes it balk at the sentence "John hasn't called me even though they said they would." That is a hard sentence for me to read and a hard sentence for me to say out loud. Why? Because in my

brain John = he, not they, because a name like John is a very traditional gendered name. But in my morning fog what I realized is that John is a complex human being, like all of us, whose identity likely contains both masculine and feminine traits, attributes that might be classified as male and female. John in fact has multiple identities, some of which are public and visible, and some of which are private and invisible, but all of which make up the totality of John. John might be an engineer of mixed Icelandic and Mexican heritage. John might date men or women or both. John might speak English and Spanish and Icelandic. John might be a dog person or a cat person or, they might be one of those rare creatures who likes cats and dogs.

*“They honors and recognizes all of John’s overlapping identities.”*

In fact, John contains multiple identities, as we all do, and it is much easier for me to refer to John with the singular pronoun *they* when I remind myself of that. *They* honors and recognizes all of John’s overlapping identities.

In *Song of Myself*, that most American of all poetical works, Walt Whitman wrote the famous line, “I contain multitudes.”

*Do I contradict myself?*

*Very well, then I contradict myself,*

*(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

John contains multitudes. I contain multitudes. You contain multitudes. All of us exist at the intersection of multiple identities, and when you think about it in those terms, the singular pronouns *he* or *she* are hardly adequate for any of us. We contain multitudes. Maybe we should all be referred to as *they*, and in a more perfect world we might be. For now we still live in a gendered world, but it is no longer a world where gender is understood as binary, and it seems to me it is a

small and simple thing to acknowledge the multitudes in someone by referring to them with a plural pronoun when they have asked us to do so.

Marti is vegan, and they are also a tax policy scholar. Marti is a graduate of a particular law school, and they are also the child of immigrants. Marti has a very high GPA, and they also struggle with depression. Marti was a hockey star in high school, but their sports career ended with a knee injury during their senior year. Marti’s pronouns are they/them/theirs.

Marti contains multitudes. So do you.

## Resources

There are a growing number of online resources that provide helpful information and guidance on the evolving use of pronouns. These are three that I find particularly helpful:

Talking About Pronouns in the Workplace (Human Rights Campaign): [www.hrc.org/resources/talking-about-pronouns-in-the-workplace](http://www.hrc.org/resources/talking-about-pronouns-in-the-workplace)

Pronouns Matter (Resources on personal pronouns): [www.mypronouns.org](http://www.mypronouns.org)

A Guide To Non-binary Pronouns And Why They Matter (Huffington Post): [www.huffpost.com/entry/non-binary-pronouns-why-they-matter\\_b\\_5a03107be4b0230facb8419a](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/non-binary-pronouns-why-they-matter_b_5a03107be4b0230facb8419a)

## About the Author

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