

## “‘T’ is for Transgender”

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November 17, 2013

In my high school French class, we were given an assignment. Our teacher had a stack of French magazines and we were each to select an article, translate it and then give a presentation, in French, on the topic of the article. So I picked up a magazine and chose an article at random. The vocabulary wasn't familiar to me, and I spent a long time trying to figure out what the subject of the article was. Finally, it dawned on me that this was an article about sex change operations. Oh, of all the topics I could have chosen to speak about in front of the class, I had to choose this one! The article went into great detail about certain body parts, and I could feel my face growing hot at the thought of having to say these words, even in French. I thought, Oh, no! I can't present this. I'll have to start over. I was such a procrastinator though, that there was no time. So, I completed my preparation and gave my presentation to the class. I was so worried that I'd be laughed at for choosing this topic, which seemed completely inappropriate. But I was surprised. I plowed through my presentation, feeling totally self-conscious and gradually realized that the class was listening attentively and politely.

I may have had a typical teenage reaction to my fear of humiliation, but reading the article was the beginning of my own education about transgenderism. Today, I feel a different kind of discomfort. This discomfort comes from remembering how self-absorbed I was and from recognizing how utterly miniscule my issue was in comparison with the reality of living authentically as a transgender person.

We take pride in the fact that we are a Welcoming Congregation. Being a Welcoming Congregation means that we have gone through an educational process to help all of us be more welcoming to all who come through our door, and especially those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Ideally, our learning is ongoing. We often use the shorthand, GLBT, or LGBT, and now we may even hear LGBTQIA, with Queer or Questioning, Intersex and Asexual being included.

Most straight UUs have come to understand sexual orientation: being attracted to someone of the same sex, or being attracted to both sexes. The “T” in the alphabet soup is much more complicated, less well understood, and much less clear-cut.

For those of us who are not transgender, our sense of being male or female is something most of take for granted. We don’t wonder about it; we don’t even consider it. If we have a male body, we feel male and think of ourselves as male. If we have a female body, we feel female and think of ourselves as female.

Transgender people cannot take their sense of being male or female for granted; the issue dominates their lives. They have a mind/body conflict; they self-identify as one gender but have the body of the opposite sex. This incongruity causes considerable confusion, frustration and anguish, to the point that most transgender individuals feel compelled to do something to resolve their conflict so they can live full and satisfying lives. At the same time, because of our society’s fear, ignorance and misinformation, many transgender individuals choose to live a double life rather than risk possible ridicule, rejection, alienation or violence.

The ratio of people who were born in a male body but identify as females (and who commonly refer to themselves as MTF) to those who were born in a female body but who identify as male (and who commonly refer to themselves as FTM) is still being debated, but based on my reading, I suspect that the number of MTFs and FTMs may be about equal. Many transgender individuals feel that they were born with a handicap that clouds every aspect of their lives and causes them such severe emotional pain that it interferes with their day-to-day functioning. Yet even though they are affected in such a significant way, typically no one else is aware of what they’re going through. Gender dysphoria, from the Greek, “hard to bear”) is a term often used as a synonym of transgenderism.

Over the years, transgender individuals have undergone all kinds of mental health treatments including shock therapy, psychoanalysis, hypnosis, and aversion therapy. None of these “treatments” has had any effect on the individual’s sense of identity, except to deepen the confusion, anxiety and depression that go along with being told that there is something “wrong” with you. That gender dysphoria is a mental problem to be cured.

In their book, True Selves, Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley, who are both sexologists and therapists specializing in transgender issues, say that most of their patients tell them that they hate to look at their bodies in the mirror, especially from the neck down. “They feel detached from it; it’s not the right body. It contradicts what they feel inside...One patient despised his body to such a degree that he only showered at night, in the dark.”

To escape their pain and to express themselves honestly as their true selves, some transgender people cross-dress and live in the world as the gender that matches their inner identity. But according to Brown and Rounsley, in their experience, “for the majority, cross-dressing alone is not enough, and they turn to hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgery.”

There’s so much to know and to understand about transgenderism. I encourage everyone to take the time to do some reading. True Selves, even though it’s a little dated, is a very helpful book for families, friends, coworkers and helping professionals. Becoming a Visible Man is another good book, although it focuses solely on the FTM perspective. And there are others.

Jamison Green writes, “Each of us, every transperson, has his or her own unique story; there may be some elements that overlap or ring true for some and not for others. Some transpeople say they knew from their earliest consciousness; others say they realized it later in life, in their 30s, 40s, or even later.”

The best way for me to convey some idea of individual transpersons’ experiences is to let them speak in their own words. First, I’d like to share an excerpt from Jamison Green’s book:

For me, the process of coming out as trans was less like opening a closet door and more like slowly lighting a series of candles in a dark cave...Older family members tell me that I began to refuse to wear dresses before I was two years old. Like many female-bodied children, I struggled all through my childhood against wearing clothing that designated me as female...To me, wearing a dress was a form of subjugation that concretely symbolized my lack of power to assert myself, just as wearing a suit and tie might feel to a feminine, male-bodied child. And when, even though “properly” dressed,

my behavior, bearing or demeanor seemed inappropriate to the gender role designated by my attire, or when strangers registered confusion as to whether I was a boy or a girl, the blame for their confusion rested squarely on me...Although I could resist...“proper” attire, I could not find the words to say that I felt like a boy.

My parents, who in spite of their conservative bent, were gentle, loving people, also believed children should be free to enjoy their childhood. They struggled to allow me to be myself while trying to indoctrinate me with “a good upbringing.” ...I had no words to tell them that I was trying hard to be who they wanted me to be, but it just didn’t feel right.

My parents gave dinner parties...every few months, and once, when I was about eight or 10 years old, a visiting couple was invited who had moved out of the area when I was an infant. The woman saw me standing next to my father and she said to him, “Oh, Ray, your son is the spitting image of you.” My father, in a moment of absurd humor only he and I shared, clapped me affectionately on the shoulder and replied, proudly, “That’s my boy.” Then he gently said to me, “Go to your room.” It was a Saturday and I was wearing...jeans and a T-shirt...This incident typifies my particular transgender experience: people often perceived me as a boy, sometimes even when I was wearing a dress. I don’t think my father would have [told the woman of her mistake]; his goal was to avoid making a guest uncomfortable. That left me hidden, invisible...

In another excellent book, [Finding the Real Me](#), a woman named Sarah Rutherford writes:

Most people believe that transition is a matter of choice –most non-trans [people], that is. In truth, transition is a need often driven and equally inhabited by fear. I have never thought of myself as anything other than a woman inside, so in essence I am a woman going through transition to achieve mind and body unity...

My transition began four years ago, but not by choice. For myself and my [wife], it was the best year in the 21 we had had; there were no money worries, no major concerns, and our sons were in their teenage years and,

more important, healthy and happy. In this environment of no concern, I let my guard down, and before I could retract or correct myself, I had... blurted out my deepest desire, a secret I had kept to myself for 46 years: to be me...I abandoned my former macho image, that of karate instructor, football player, tough guy, 240-pound façade. Yet, in those first few months, fear drove me and my weight dropped to a mere 148 pounds. I [couldn't] stop crying [for] the first 6 months, for I knew what was happening –I was losing my world, and everything in it. The freedom I had always dreamed of was happening, but like a hungry dragon released from prison, it was devouring everything else in its path...

My [wife] and I separated within four months...to protect the boys and my partner from the ridicule that would come if people found out. It was also, my beautiful partner knew, the only way I would stay alive in the long term, ...pushing me into a transition I was fighting against yet wanted so much...

My eldest son immediately turned against me...My youngest son, on the other hand...took it all in his stride.

My partner did what she could to help me adjust, corrected my mistakes...helped me unlearn everything I had learned as a male, and for the first time in my life, despite the pain and fear, I felt as if I was waking up at last. We went shopping together, bought clothes; she taught me how to use makeup, and all those small nuances that most girls learn from their mothers...

I had a breakdown. I remember the fear; the terror of losing everything: my family, home, the only love I ever had, and it all became too much....Once out of the hospital, I found a flat...Unbeknownst to me, I had chosen the worst street in the small town...The attacks [and death threats] started. For a week the attacks happened day and night; the fear was awful. The police wouldn't intervene....Eventually, another flat came up...and I took it...

If you ask me if transition and gender freedom are worth all the pain, trauma, loss...hell no, I wouldn't wish it upon my worst enemy; it has been

a nightmare. Yet, I am me now; I am free to be myself and live my life accordingly...

My determination is primary and singular: to make transition for those coming after me as easy and natural as I can, so that all the s-h-i-t that I and others have suffered and still suffer will one day, through education and example, be a thing of the past.

For many transgender people, the ability to live an authentic life does outweigh the negative aspects of their experience. I'll end with a short piece written by a trans person who wrote anonymously:

This Moment

I have lived my life for this moment  
Every road taken, every poem written  
Every game won or lost  
Every joy, sorrow, anger, or acceptance  
Has brought me here today

I've traveled far to be here  
Seen ten thousand sunsets  
And ten million drops of rain

I've known love and loss  
And birth, and death  
I've learned the secret tricks of survival  
That nobody could ever teach  
All so I could come to this place