

Polare Edition 28

Published: March 1999 Last Update: June 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015

Editorial

by Craig Andrews, Polare Editor

This is the second of our trial of three "bumper" issues at 44 pages.

Some terrific contributions from Taragh and Laura and you can see these on pages five and 24. You're always welcome to respond, debate, have a gripe or agree with writers here in *Polare* and these can be mailed in or emailed in.

For gender-diverse family issues, check out pages 10, 17 and 29. Something there for everyone.

Windward Bound - a gorgeous looking vessel graces the front cover this time, is owned and run by our own Sarah Parry and is a trans* friendly project.

Our Social & Support Worker, Sean Taylor is gearing up for 1999 and you can note dates and activities and events that he'll be running this year over on pages 22 and 23. Anything there you're interested in - please let him know about it!

Manager's Report

by Elizabeth Riley, Gender Centre Manager

I have recently been appointed to the executive of **Employment Equity Specialist's Association (E.E.S.A.)**. **E.E.S.A.** are the representative body of **E.E.O. practitioners for the N.S.W. Government sector** and have representatives from most government departments and state authorities in **N.S.W. E.E.S.A.** works in close conjunction with the **Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Employment (O.D.E.O.P.E.)** and its members are committed to ensuring fair and equitable practice in the workplace.

I have been a member of **E.E.S.A.** for over twelve months and have been trying to keep the issue of transgender employment in focus. As a member of the executive, I will be in a position to present a more consistent argument for employment equity for transgenders in the public sector. I also expect to be presenting a talk at the **E.E.S.A.** conference to be held in November of this year. Attendees will come from a broader cross-section of the public service than just those who are members of **E.E.S.A.** My aim will be to address the attitudes that often serve to bar transgenders from employment.

It should be noted though, that **E.E.S.A.** members' commitment to equity is not always reflected by the management of the organisations they belong to. Even in the targeted areas of equity; women, **N.E.S.B.**, aboriginality and disability the desired outcomes have still not been achieved. There is, therefore, still some work to be done to improve the situation for the transgender community who are not, as yet, a targeted group.

To those of you in search of work and who are regularly submitting resumes, all I can say is keep your spirits up and keep at it. Your efforts may be frustrating, but persistence is the answer. If you have the skills required, try applying for state government positions. These organisations should be increasingly more receptive to transgender applicants.

Feature Articles



Jane's revelations threw me into an identity crisis of major proportions: If my lover of ten years has always felt like a man, am I really a lesbian?

A Partner's Story

Jane has been an out Lesbian for over 20 years and involved in a monogamous relationship for over ten. She thought that she had seen it all until her then-lover informed her that she had always wanted to be a man. She shares her experiences in this article.

Dennis / Denise

Dennis and Madeline have been married for 25 years and have three adult children. They are the coordinators for a national caring support group for cross-dressers, transgender people, their partners and family in Tauranga, Bay of Plenty, New Zealand.

Positive Policing

While returning home from her monthly laser treatment, Terri was assaulted by a group of five Manchester United football supporters. In this article she explains that she was treated with total respect by the police, hospital staff and the other people who helped her.

A Farewell to Passing

Transition can be fraught with lots of hidden issues that aren't that obvious at first. In this article, Laura Seabrook discusses some of the observations that she has made during her transition, as well as two of the more contentious issues, passing and being labelled.

If you are semi-skilled or unskilled then consider approaching Centrelink to talk to them about training options. Whether you are looking for work in the public or private sector you have a much better chance if you have the skills to back you up.

Finally, I would reiterate my view that the outlook is improving for the transgender community in many areas, including employment. My election to the E.E.S.A. executive is a solid reflection of the support that we are gaining from many in the wider community.

Poster Campaign

The Transgender Working Party, (chaired by the Department for Women) is launching a poster campaign to raise awareness of transgender issues in the wider community. The poster campaign will be similar to the successful anti-homophobia campaign. We are doing a trial run of 10,000 posters which will be distributed through a range of government and non-government organisations. If successful, we will seek to extend the campaign.

The Gender Centre would like to acknowledge the many government departments who have donated money towards the production of the posters, and the representatives of these departments for their commitment in attending working party meetings and in working to develop strategies to address the issues facing the transgender community.

Share My Story Evenings

We are planning a series of evenings with special guest speakers who will share their personal experience of gender transition. Speakers will be chosen to present a range of information around their successful transition and in a question/answer session can advise or assist those present in the pleasures and pitfalls of their own process.

We will initially run these sessions informally at occasional Tuesday evening drop-ins. These evenings should be interesting and potentially very helpful, so stay tuned for more details.

Got A Problem? Need Some Help?

We are hoping to include a column in *Polare* which will address issues facing the community. If you have a pressing problem, be it legal, medical or anything else that is specific to your being transgender, we would invite you to write to us with details of the issue. We will select a problem from each issue and then attempt to find expert opinion on what course of action you might take. (You will not be personally identified).

We are aware of course, that the transgender community faces many issues and some of these do not have ready solutions. We will try to focus on those issues that affect a cross-section of our community and that we can provide reliable advice on. Please note: that any member of the community is welcome to contact us at any time to assist with issues that they are having. The column in *Polare* is in addition to our regular service.

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A Partner's Story

I am what I am, but what am I?

by Jane's Friend

Article appeared in Polare magazine: March 1999 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



"But I'm a dyke" I thought! And I'm in love with her. Or is it him?

I have been an out Lesbian for over twenty years and involved in a monogamous relationship for over ten. I thought I had seen it all until my then lover informed me a few months ago that she had always wanted to be a man. Because of the process I have been through since, I wanted to write about my experiences, as an educational tool for the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities about transgendered people and transsexuals (a.k.a. the 'trans' community).

Jane's revelations threw me into an identity crisis of major proportions: If my lover of ten years has always felt like a man, am I really a lesbian?

I can't be the only one in the lesbian/gay community who's had no understanding, a lot of prejudice, and complete denial that they are us. Since everyone's experience is different, I don't speak for anyone but myself; this is

not representative of the entire trans community.

I am writing this anonymously because my ex-lover is not out to very many people as an undecided pre-hormones transsexual. And I am out to fewer people than that as a trans person myself. For that reason, I am calling her 'Jane' (as in 'Jane Doe') or 'John' (as in 'John Doe') or 'J' for the purposes of this article. Pronouns get confusing here, so bear with me! For both Jane and I, pronouns are personally weird at this point in our lives; hence, after a certain point in this article I will begin to use pronouns interchangeably.

How we got here

Jane told me about herself during one of those lovers' conversations at two in the morning - the kind where you tell all your innermost fantasies that you probably wouldn't share at two in the afternoon. What I heard her saying was that she'd always fantasised about being a gay man and that if she had the money, she'd have an operation tomorrow. (This is not accurate terminology, but we were both more ignorant then)

I was in such a state of shock I couldn't say anything meaningful; I spent the rest of the night crying silently, finally arising at 5:30am and leaving. I felt I had never known my lover at all, and this cast me adrift. I left her a note that said, in part, "I can't be in a relationship knowing I am a poor substitute for a gay man." I wandered our neighbourhood for hours, eating breakfast glassy-eyed at a local café at 7:30am, and going home when I thought it was safe. I waited until I thought she had gone to work. I had no idea what I was going to do, but knew I would need some clothes and stuff.

However, Jane had called our closest friends, in tears, and cancelled her work for the day. I got home and she was there with our friends. We made up, somewhat, and our friends left us alone to talk.

Jane had had these fantasies most of her life. I never had a clue, and she had never told anyone else. The primary character in her fantasies was a gay man; she felt best about herself when she was 'being' John. Sometimes she would let John handle a difficult situation for her. John had become so prominent in her mind, she was forced to realise that John was the person she thought she should have been born, rather than Jane. She felt more comfortable and centred as John than as Jane. In other words, she should have been born in a male body.

I am what I am, but what am I?

Jane's revelations threw me into an identity crisis of major proportions: If my lover of ten years has always felt like a man, am I really a lesbian? Have I been involved with a man all this time? What happens to our relationship if Jane starts taking hormones and ends up having surgery to actually try to be a man? She insisted she would be the same person, only more fully herself because her body would match her inner feelings. "But I'm a dyke" I thought! "And I'm in love with her. Or is it him?"

What does it mean, then, to be male or female? Is it Jane I'm in love with, or John? I have always liked her better when she was confident and centred - who doesn't want that in a lover? According to her, that's John, not Jane. I have come to see gender and sexuality as much more fluid than society (including the lesbian community) has traditionally defined them. And a man who was

originally socialised as female is not the same man he would have been had he been born in a male body and socialised male. We really need some new terminology here, as well as a paradigm shift about how we view gender and sexuality.

In my attempts to come to terms with the issues, I've done a lot of studying and have developed an initial explanation that makes sense to me. I talked to 'J' about it and he said it sounded very much like how he feels. I would like to share this with the gay and lesbian community so perhaps when we finally come-out to our friends, they will have some idea what we're up against and won't ostracise us out of fear or discomfort. (This sounds remarkably like coming-out to narrow-minded people, doesn't it? Bear that in mind.)

My Theory

I have concluded that there are three continuums that form sexuality and gender identification. I use the scale 1 to 10 for the sake of convenience, though I think it's not as cut and dried as that, fluctuating somewhat throughout one's life. The first continuum has to do with sexual orientation. I have long believed that most people are bisexual. There are a few true homosexuals and a few true heterosexuals, but most fall somewhere in the middle. Those who identify as bisexual are really in the middle of the continuum; most who identify as homo- or heterosexual fall to one side or the other of the middle but would be more willing to accept their bisexual tendencies were our society not so 'one or the other' about sex. This is old news to many lesbians and gay men, who generally go through a lot of soul searching to find themselves. What may be less familiar are the other continuums, physical gender and psychological/emotional gender.

All of us have met men who have high voices, little body hair and a tendency to have breasts rather than pecs. There are also many women who need to shave facial hair, often bleaching the area so it won't show. There are a few men and women who have some of each other's sex organs. This is the physical continuum of gender; there is no such thing as 'men' and 'women' as if they were two different, distinct things. Both are on the same continuum.

Chromosomes and hormones are the main ingredients determining our placement on the physical continuum, and there is very little chemical difference between the female and male hormones. It is socialisation that has taught us that there is such a huge difference between men and women, and socialisation that is responsible for the idea that being a man is somehow better than being a woman. There are far more similarities between the genders than differences. (I can hear all you 1970s lesbians, my age group, hissing out there!)

The third continuum has to do with psychological/emotional gender orientation. Do you feel more like a man or a woman in your own mind? This is a very difficult concept for people to understand when their own psychological, emotional and physical continuums are closely aligned; they can't really understand what it feels like to see your own body as alien to your personality, to be surprised by what you see when you look in the mirror because you feel so much more like the opposite sex from your body. Those people who have equally strong male and female aspects to their personality are in the middle of this continuum, as I am - the gender blenders, or bi-gendered. I am equally uncomfortable applying the term 'woman' or 'man' to myself; neither fits me by itself because both do. Again, society forces us young to be 'one or the other'; there is no place for people like me.

The traditional view

The transgendered person traditionally has been classified as having a mental disorder known as gender dysphoria. What it boils down to is, 'J's' body is around a three on the female side of the physical continuum and he feels nearer six or seven on the male side of the psychological-emotional continuum. In order for a person to feel really comfortable in his/her body, those numbers have to line up better than that.

If 'J's' mind felt like an eight or nine on the male side, he probably wouldn't be alive right now; that would mean a discomfort level so great, with no information about why, that he probably would have committed suicide long ago. People with that much difference on the two continuums are those who loathe their bodies, the men who want to slice off their penises, women who want to get rid of their breasts, etc. 'J' is in despair even now with the discrepancy level as it is, but he doesn't loathe his female body to the extent he wants to harm it, just modify it a bit so his body matches more closely his psychological gender. And 'J' is uncertain whether he wants to even go that far.

Rather than considering this condition a mental disorder, I find more credible the theory that the cause of gender dysphoria is a hormonal process in utero (one of many that determine everything about us) that didn't happen quite right and a male 'psyche' was born into a female body (or vice versa). Under this theory, gender dysphoria could be more accurately described as a birth defect than a mental disorder. This is assuming one wants to classify it as a 'disease' at all, a controversial point in the trans community right now. Having a 'mental disorder' carries some stigma; on the other hand having the medical diagnosis is the only way to obtain treatment, and treatment does help a lot of people. One cannot get a prescription for hormones, or the services of a reputable surgeon, without that official diagnosis.

A lesbian friend of ours recently said, "It's like magic! What a gift to be able to experience living as both genders in the same lifetime." It's all in your attitude! Why not consider this a gift? What could be more well-rounded than a person raised as one gender who then changes his/her body and/or manner of dress to live life as the other gender? This is special, as many Native American tribes recognised. Such people are called 'two-spirit' people and are honoured.

Female-to-Males - where have they been?

In this culture, many an F.T.M.s has come out of the lesbian community; some live separatist lifestyles, holding men at arms' length to avoid facing the strong male presence inside themselves. This is not to say that all lesbian separatists are really F.T.M.s; I don't believe that at all. However, a number of F.T.M.s I have met identified as lesbian separatists before they finally realised their gender identities were more male than female. (A number also lived as heterosexual females prior to transitioning, but I'm speaking of my own

experience here, and to some extent 'J's' experience.)

A familiar scenario: you feel isolated and alone as a teenager, you fall in love with a woman and think, "Oh, I must be a lesbian!" You come-out, with relief at finally figuring it out and a feeling of finally 'belonging'. What is less familiar to many is this possible outcome: the years pass, and you still feel isolated and alone. Those feelings never really went away, after that first euphoria of embracing lesbianism, and you can't figure it out; surely you've found your community, your 'family', and your place in life?

For many an F.T.M. who has lived in the lesbian community, it takes years, until the mid-thirties or early-forties, to figure out that s/he never was a lesbian at all but a heterosexual male born into the wrong body type. It seems logical that since most people are heterosexual, most of the males born in female bodies are heterosexual. Upon realising their attraction to women, most females are going to assume they are lesbians, not that they are males in the wrong body! (Sometimes my life feels like the plot of an improbable science=fiction movie!)

What to do about it

Hormones and surgery are a 'band-aid' treatment, but there is no "cure" that will align the physical and psychological/emotional continuums even if one wanted to (any more than one can 'cure' homosexuality). The window of opportunity is closed before birth for changing such hormones. It is possible that someday, genetic engineering of embryos could change such conditions; but as an adult, therapy, hormones and transsexualism are the only treatments at this time.

Sex reassignment surgery is so drastic - very painful and sometimes resulting in an inability to have an orgasm - that it is usually recommended only for those who are so dysphoric they are unable to resolve their problem any other way. Those with fairly mild dysphoria may only opt for hormones and never have any surgery. Some, especially dedicated singers or actors, may choose instead to cross-dress and 'pass' as the opposite gender as they wish without hormones or surgery at all. Only intense soul-searching and therapy can determine which options are best for any given individual; this is one of the most important decisions one can make in a lifetime. Choosing to have children or choosing to end one's life are the only ones that compare, it seems to me.

When a person has spent the first twenty or thirty years of her/his life socialised as one gender, it is extremely difficult to fully change to the other. The unconscious attitudes of the birth gender, ingrained from such an early age, are always there, though they may lessen with time after adopting life in the opposite gender. I have met heterosexual F.T.M.s I thought were gay men, but it was just their female socialisation showing;. I have also met M.T.F.s who struck me as having a lot of male attitudes. Again, these differences usually fade as years go by after a transition; most transsexuals, closely study the mannerisms of the sex they are changing to, in order to effectively blend in after their transition. There has always been great debate about how much gender differences are innate and how much is due to socialisation; studying long-term transsexuals could lead to some interesting answers, or at least more information to add to the discussion.

What now?

So where does all this leave our relationship? Well, for right now, we still consider ourselves family, but everything is changing. 'J' might start hormones as early as next spring. He would then wait to see if he needs surgery also to feel fully male, or whether hormones will be enough for him to be comfortable. The surgery consists of several processes, depending on life goals, and can take over a year. It is rarely covered by insurance (his doesn't) and can be very expensive, again depending on which options are chosen.

I have had my own gender identity crisis as a result of 'J's' revelations, questioning the bedrock of my own life. My therapist had me identify all the different aspects of my personality and name them; this led me to conclude that I have about equal blends of male and female aspects. This being the case, I am choosing not to transition; I wouldn't feel significantly more comfortable in a male body than in a female one, so why bother? But I am probably going to change my name, to honour the male aspects who are living in a female body.

This redefinition of myself has caused me to examine, for the first time in twenty years, my own place in the lesbian community. Do I really belong here with so much 'maleness' in my personality? I have concluded that I belong wherever I feel comfortable, as I have female aspects who are undeniably attracted to women. But I can never be a separatist again, as was my tendency earlier in my life. To do so would be to deny a strong part of my personality, much like remaining in a heterosexual relationship to help deny one's homosexuality to oneself. The denial takes its toll, and the price is happiness and peace of mind.

I don't know what the future holds for 'J' and I. He still loves me. I still love her/him. We are both in therapy. We email each other regularly, but don't spend much actual time together; gender identity issues are so intensely personal it's very difficult to remain centred and self-focused enough to make these most important decisions of a lifetime, and deal with your ex-lover at the same time. We have not ruled out the possibility of some future relationship and will certainly be close friends if nothing more, once we've resolved our individual gender identity issues. 'J' has helped me with this article, giving me valuable feedback and supporting me every step of the way.

Who knows how I would feel about 'J' if she did start hormone treatments and became a guy? Who knows how "J" would feel about me, despite his identification as a gay man? I have met transsexuals who have gone into transition believing one thing about their sexuality and found it changed when they actually occupied an opposite gender body. My feeling is that people who have lived as both genders can't really consider things like sexuality and gender orientation to be as fixed as society proscribes. This is particularly true when there are strong emotional ties between two people, as there are between 'J' and I.

The budding trans movement

'J' and I attended the first conference for female-to-male trans people in San Francisco this past August. What an eye-opener! What

struck me most was the diversity of people; it was somewhat like taking 300 random white people from all over the country, putting them in a room together, and holding a conference based on their commonality as white people. The people in attendance had nothing in common (including ethnicity) except some degree of gender identity questions, and the degrees ran from mild to extreme.

There were guys who had been guys for decades. Guys who had just started hormones the week before. Gender blenders like me. Partners, Straights, Gays, Bisexuals. I met an F.T.M. who is now a gay male drag queen. Two heterosexual parents with their new 'son' which was wonderful. It was somewhat disjointed because there was so little common ground between all the participants, and I was a bit uncomfortable around all that 'teenage male' energy, a female who starts taking male hormones will go through male puberty with all the symptoms of a teenage boy. Oh, joy ... The one thing we did share was relief at finding we are not alone. There were guys there who had never met another F.T.M., and no one had ever seen 300 F.T.M.s in the same room together.

The trans movement is in its infancy, just beginning to wave a hand and say, "Hey, I'm over here! Don't ignore me anymore!", just as lesbians and gay men were doing some twenty-five years ago. There have been a few trans voices in the wilderness, but the lesbian and gay civil rights movement is very strong, established and mature compared to that of trans people.

Our movement is not synonymous with the lesbian and gay movement; many trans people are heterosexual. But we are a sexual minority nonetheless and the banner we can all march under is 'Queer!' To the religious right, we are all perverted; the Christian Coalition neither notices nor cares that we're different from each other. So don't abandon the trans folks, shuddering in disgust and feeling glad you're not 'one of them'. We're all queer, so get over it, expand your definitions and broaden your mind! There are so many parallels between our movements. We can share resources and join our strengths to our mutual benefit. It will impoverish both our movements if we turn our backs on each other; any civil rights movement is diminished when it discriminates against another minority. Many of us thought we were you, and some of us are you. Think about that if anyone had told me six months ago what I'd be writing today, I would have laughed uproariously, but here we are.

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Dennis / Denise

Balancing Hirself as a Person with Two Spirits

by Dennis / Denise

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My name is Dennis or Denise depending on my persona at the time. My wife Madeline and I are the Coordinators for C.D. R.O.M. in Tauranga and the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand. C.D. R.O.M., a New Zealand National caring support group for Cross/Transgender people, their partners and family.

Let me introduce ourselves. We have been married twenty-five years and have three grown up children. Like most of us, I started cross-dressing as a teenager back in the 1960s with no one to talk to; it confused the hell out of me. I wasn't gay but felt better wearing ladies clothing, what was happening? Over the next thirty years I dressed in secret not telling Madeline, I felt guilty because of the lies, worthless and at times very depressed, too much society generated emotional garbage for any individual to carry around.

In 1994, a major incident happened, which really made me look at myself and for the first time I had to find out and be proud of who I really was. I can remember looking in the mirror at Dennis over the years and having absolutely no idea who that reflection belonged to. It just wasn't me, I was lost!

In 1997, we came across C.D. R.O.M. and with the group's support; I started my journey for the truth that would ultimately set me free. I told Madeline very gently and with her help we told our three children and my Mom and Dad, also selected friends. The general feeling with everyone concerned was relief. The barrier I had put up to hide behind which they had all felt, was down. If they couldn't understand my Cross/Transgender personality, they very much appreciated my honesty. On telling our youngest daughter, Michelle of Denise, she offered me her pink outfit. Madeline was most put out that Michelle hadn't offered it to her. Michelle's comment "well Mom, I think it would look better on Dad". Free thinking children are just so accepting of honest parents, thank you Michelle. The first time I saw Denise in the mirror, I knew who that reflection belonged to. Denise had completed the circle.

Today I balance myself as a person of two spirits. I work and earn a living as Dennis, I support my wife and family as Dennis, we all enjoy Dennis for the strong, caring, masculine looking person he is. But my leisure time is for Denise, that is who I would really rather be, feminine, spiritual and sensitive and because Madeline hasn't lost Dennis, she is so accepting and loving of Denise.

Have fun with your Cross/transgender personality. Keep your whole world balanced. Cherish your supportive partner, family and friends. Don't become too vain and watch your feminine side transform you into the very special whole person you are.

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Positive Policing

Harassed on a Train, Treated with Respect by Police

by Terri Anne Walker

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Last Saturday I was returning to Manchester from Altrincham after my monthly laser treatment. I boarded the 14:15 Metro

to Manchester and suddenly realised that Manchester United were at home and the train was full of football supporters. Everything went well for a while but eventually I was "read" by a small group (5) who proceeded to announce to everyone "We've got a trannie on board". At this point two people spoke up and said "leave her alone, she is probably just going to the Village". This seemed to calm them down.

The Manchester police officers were no less courteous, again I was treated with respect.

However as they were leaving the tram at Old Trafford three of them decided to give me a leaving present, a punch to the stomach and as I folded up a kick to the head (badly bruised jaw) and several kicks and punches to the rest of my lower body. As I was lying there the two people who had spoken out for me walked straight up to the police officers on the station and pointed out the lads telling them what had gone on.

The police immediately arrested the group and helped me from the tram. Then came an even nicer surprise, they took me to the hospital where the staff treated me with total respect (I was "Miss Walker" throughout and was there anything they could do over and above, what was being done already).

The Manchester police officers were no less courteous, again I was treated with respect. Indeed the lads who had attacked me were immediately charged so I was told and after the hospital released me I was driven to the station to make a statement. I expected at the least a chilly reception at the police station. What a surprise I was in for.

Every officer I met was polite and treated me with respect. Nothing it seemed was too much trouble for "Miss Walker". Now some people may say that they were being political, but I was there and the atmosphere was more one of concern than one of "I'll pretend" if you see what I mean.

Not only that but they phoned Melanie for me (I couldn't speak) and arranged for Mel to be taken to Birmingham New Street Station to meet me off the train. Then they arranged transport to Manchester Piccadilly Station for me so that I could catch the next train.

The two people who stood up for me and helped the police were both Manchester United fans too and because of their intervention missed the game. I am currently writing to Manchester United to see if I can arrange something special for them from the club, as without them the jobs would have got away with everything. I will let you know the outcome of both the court case and the Manchester United letter just as soon as I have any info. I would like to say a very big thank you to the true Manchester United fans, Manchester Constabulary, and Manchester's hospital staff. They made a hurt and frightened girl feel safe and welcome in what seemed at the time an unfriendly world.

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A Farewell to Passing

... and a Note on Labels, Surgery, Definitions, Religions and Transcendence

by Laura Seabrook

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Laura Seabrook

Gender transition can be fraught with lots of traps that aren't obvious at first. Two of these are being labelled and 'passing'. When I began my own gender transition

I was only vaguely aware of either issue. I was then thirty-six, and after years of denial I finally gave up my vain attempts at trying to be a man, and finally came-out to being a woman.

Four years later and I've undergone a lot of changes. I've gone from fronting as a man, being employed as a public-servant, nominally Christian, and living in Perth (Western Australia), to fronting as a woman, being a visual-arts student at university, a pagan, and now live in Newcastle (New South Wales). The biggest

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change however was probably coming to terms with being a woman and at the same time accepting the masculine side of myself.

This article details some of the observations and conclusions I've made along the way, and is based on a plenary I gave at the 1998 National Organisation of Women Students Australia (N.O.W.S.A.) Conference, which I attended in July 1997.

Labels

In a recent artwork of mine, I used some of the following list of labels that have been used to describe me:

- » artist; bisexual; crone; daughter, eccentric; epileptic; friend; galla; geek-girl; human being; Laura Seabrook; male; middle-aged; outgoing; pagan; pre-operative; queer; shy; single; sub-genius; transgender, transsexual; trekker; university student; Western Australian; witch; woman and writer.

The artwork was entitled 'Labels are for Tin Cans'. In it, I made my own image into a range of generic products.

You'll notice that some of the labels I've mentioned are not normally thought of in that way, like my name or the fact that I'm a university student. Others seem only to be accurate at certain times in my life, like middle-aged, pre-operative, or once again, university student. But they're labels all the same. And no one label ever encompasses all the qualities that a person possesses - their function is to do the opposite - provide a shorthand way of dealing with other people.

Now even if you don't label yourself, other people probably will. Labels in themselves are nothing new or even bad. They are just an easy means by which we handle information about the world and each other. It's so much easier for most people to refer to others by using labels than it is to examine them too closely. That takes time and effort, and these always seem to be in short supply.

Passing

Allied to the idea of labels is that of 'passing'. This is the reaction to the effort you put into your appearance and behaviour. I first read about passing in a book called *Freaks*, as follows:

“ There is, that is to say, no agreement among those traditionally called 'Freaks' about what they would like, for programmatic reasons to be called now; only a resolve that it be something else. Those who still earn a living by exhibiting themselves in side shows apparently prefer to be called 'entertainers' and 'performers' like tightrope walkers and clowns. But larger numbers of 'strange people' do not want to be considered performers or indeed anything special or unique. They strive therefore to 'pass', i.e., to become assimilated into the world of 'normals' either by means of chemotherapy, like certain Dwarfs and Giants, or difficult and dangerous operations, like some Hermaphrodites or conjoined twins.

I read this in 1973 when I was sixteen and at the time I didn't think that passing would be something relevant to myself. But I was

already in a state of denial over being transsexual. This didn't end until 1994, when I began my gender transition. Up until that time, I'd felt myself to be a 'fake' male but not a man. When I finally began my transition I 'came-out' not just as a woman, but as me. Internally I have the gender identity of woman, and initially it was very important that I be recognised as such, so I considered passing to be vital.

Now some transgendered people think that three things validate you as a woman: Passing - that is, not being detected as being transgendered; Sex with men - if they find you attractive then you're doing something right; and having your own vagina - you must be a woman if you've got one, right?

But really none of these do. People will perceive others differently, depending upon any number of variables. Men will have sex with lots of things, not just women (Just check out the emergency wards sometimes). Plenty of female-to-male transsexuals still have their vaginas - they're not women, but transgendered men.

But passing is the most obvious of these because it's the most visible. And it's not just transgendered people who have problems with passing. The act of 'passing' can be quite real for many people. For example, Anne Bolin on page 138 of her book *In Search of Eve* recounts the following anecdote that happened during her research for the book:

Another incident was also revealing. A friend was visiting who had suffered a pituitary disease that resulted in the development of extremely large hands, feet, and head. She was a genetic female and had no gender conflict. In the midst of our discussion another friend dropped by. She came in and proceeded to the kitchen with me, and in a whispered voice, apologised for interrupting me because she thought I was interviewing a transsexual informant. This friend had met several transsexuals who, recognising a sympathetic other, had revealed their transsexualism to her. As a consequence, she questioned this woman's gender on the basis of her large hands and had ascribed her transsexual status.

And Naomi Wolfe writes on pages 239-240 in *Promiscuities*:

The shaming of girls and women from acknowledging a sexuality on their own terms, or a sexual past, pressures them into a contemporary version of 'passing'. The need to "pass" for someone other creates a vulnerability to external anxieties about womanhood in one's private life - as well as vulnerability about the fact of one's womanhood in the workplace.

Another good example of passing is a recent film called *Gattaca*. This is arguably a science fiction film set in the near future. In it, people are genetically engineered, registered, and their future performance predicted from birth. Personal identification is made by advanced D.N.A. testing, and in most cases everyone knows exactly who the other person is.

The result is a totally stratified society in which a marriage proposal is accompanied with an exchange of genetic data. The main character (Vincent) is a person who is classified as a 'lower class' of person. With collusion he manages to pass as a genetically 'better' person in order to work at a better job. While this might sound far fetched, it seems all too likely an extension of current practice.

So you see, it isn't just transgendered folks that are involved in the passing act, everybody does (or fails to) one way or another. And on the whole, people don't question this. People mistake the map for the territory, mistake one word for another, and that's where the trouble starts. Our appearance, clothing and bodies are part of passing and in doing so become symbols of who we are or aspire to be.

Surgery

The media for their own ends are constantly manipulating these symbols, as it is from there that we look for images of who and what is considered normal. The entire fashion and cosmetics industry is built upon people's dissatisfaction with their appearance. Thousands of women have breast enhancements and reductions and facial alterations in response to this. Is it any wonder that transsexuals have 'genital makeovers' (the term *Cosmopolitan* used recently) to convert our genitals from one set to another. We're just doing what other women do, but in a more obvious manner. But facial and body modification can go too far. The recent cases of Jocelyn Wildenstein and Caprice illustrate this. Jocelyn Wildenstein has had over twelve surgical procedures on her face at a cost of over \$50,000. But her face looks more like a doll than a human one. She was last reported suing her husband for pressuring her into undergoing such surgery in the first place. Caprice is another Australian male-to-female transsexual. She has had ten surgical procedures over seven years at a cost of \$80,000 to make her over in the image of Barbie; the details are extensive and horrific: implants in hips, buttocks, cheek, lips and breasts, four ribs removed; a nose job; her jaw has been chiselled; her eye sockets deepened and sex reassignment surgery.

And while I support Caprice's right to choose to do this, I question the wisdom of it. What happens in ten or twenty years time when she can no longer maintain the image so desired? Human beings age, Barbie doesn't.

I was fortunate to read Kaz Cooke's *Real Gorgeous* before starting transition. It helped temper my fashion sense to more comfortable, sensible clothing. When I wrote to Ms. Cooke to thank her for the book, she replied saying that I was the first respondent to say that she'd wanted wider hips! Another book I read just before transition was Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, published in 1978. This is a critique of the current medical and social theories of transsexuality.

Raymond does this from a separatist/feminist perspective. She rejects 'male-to-constructed-females' (her words) as women on the grounds that we have XY chromosomes and a different history from other women. To Raymond we are patriarchal controlled eunuchs whose function is to keep women in place, who 'sponge off the spirit of womanhood', And she considers 'female-to-constructed-males'

as being misguided women.

Definitions

All of which raises the question of exactly what is a woman? Raymond asserts "that it is someone born with XX chromosomes that has a history of being raised as a girl or woman". Common sense notions would seem to support this. But common sense notions are gained from the culture that one inhabits, and that culture is influenced by the media and other sources. So once again we come back to the idea of labels and how they are applied.

Alexander Murray, in a recent issue of *Venereology* suggests that there are three types of attitudes within societies and individuals as regards transgender issues:

- » **Pre-Transsexual:** This is a model of gender as categorical, discrete, and dualistic. Within this model masculine and feminine are separate and unambiguous. In such an attitude, it is considered impossible to move from one category to another.
- » **Pro-Transsexual:** This allows for regulated movement between gender poles. Gender crossers are generally expected to possess innate physical and behavioural characteristics similar to the target gender and make efforts to change characteristics that are dissimilar.
- » **Post-Transsexual:** These express a model of gender as dimensional and fluid and allow individuals relative freedom to find their own place along the spectrum of gender and to experiment with different places at different times.

From this perspective, Raymond upholds a pre-transsexual schema, against a pro-transsexual one. Anyone who's interested in a counter argument would do well to read Sandy Stone's *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-transsexual manifesto*, which, as you might gather from the title, proposes a post-transsexual schema.

I will mention one thing about her definition however. Before attending the N.O.W.S.A. conference I made a trip to visit a friend at Nimbin. On the way I gave a lift to her boyfriend. To my surprise he told me that he had a sister who used to be a brother. My first reaction was "aha - they're transsexual", but I was mistaken. His sibling was born with XX chromosomes but due to a medical problem, female hormones were not produced until late-teens.

This person appeared to be male and was raised as a boy, and was endlessly teased about having small genitalia. Then, about at about eighteen years of age, their testes retreated into the body to become ovaries, the penis changed to a clitoris and they grew breasts. This would have been a tragedy except for the fact that secretly they'd always thought of themselves as a woman or a girl, so in the end they were proven right. Now the only difference between that person and myself is that I was born with XY chromosomes.

When you think about it, you might realise that the words 'woman' and 'man' are both just labels. They don't actually describe females and males as such, but the gender roles expected of them. These can be complex or simple, and vary from one culture to another. It's easier to assume such roles than be original.

From the moment we are born we exist in a sea of culture, one that inundates us with ideas about what and who we are based on sex, skin colour, birth place of origin, sexuality as many divisions and distinctions that you need or want. Carol Travis says on page sixty of her book *The Mismeasure of Woman*:

My concern is with a growing tendency to turn the tables from 'us - them' thinking (with men as the problem) to 'them - us' thinking (with men as the problem). Framing the question in terms of polarities; regardless of which pole is the valued one, immediately sets up false choices for women and men. It continues to divide the world into 'men' and 'women' as if these categories were unified opposites. It obscures the fact that the opposing qualities associated with masculinity and femininity are caricatures to begin with.

But here's the catch. If I can see labels and passing for what they are - social constructions and the implementation of such - then how can I claim the label of woman, as I do? There are two answers to this. The first is found on page 243 of Naomi Wolfe's *Promiscuities*, which deals with rites of passage:

When over the course of those years did we 'become women'? Was it when we first put on make-up? With our first kiss? When we discovered our sexual identity? When we first had intercourse? When we had earned our own money for the first time? When we graduated from high school? When we first became pregnant, those of us who did? No. None of those events turned us into women. I think we became women, in our culture, when we made a decision that, even if we didn't know what womanhood meant or whether we had arrived there for sure, all the markers imposed on us were flawed, and that we were somehow going to find a way, through whatever struggle it might take, to determine the meaning of 'becoming a woman' for ourselves.

And all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, did indeed find our various ways through not all the way to where we wanted to be; but closer.

I read that, and realised that it was exactly what I, and others like me do. There are no 'women-born-women' or 'men-born-men' either. We are all born babies, and it is our own sense of self-identity and what we do about it that makes us who we are. On that trip to Nimbin I mentioned my other travelling companion told me that in the development of the human fertilised egg, the first item to be developed is the blastopore, which later develops into the anus. In other words we are all born assholes, and it's up to us what we do about it.

Religions

The second way I know about being a woman is through my religions. I have two - Pagan and Sub-Genius. I'll mention Pagan first.

In my version of paganism, loosely based on Wicca, there is the Goddess and the God. The Goddess is the supreme feminine force in the universe, and the God her junior counterpart. Junior, because the Goddess comes first and epitomises all the aspects of femininity associated with being a woman. The God on the other hand is a shape shifter, a changeling - and a gatekeeper of change who delimits boundaries, who is prepared to die and be reborn again in change and growth. This is a far cry from Jehovah, though Jesus fits this pattern well. What distinguishes my brand of paganism from others is that I'm Neo-Hellenic. I have a pantheon of Greek! Roman Goddess, each with aspects of the Goddess that are relevant to me. Three of these are Hecate, Cybele and Athena. Athena is a transgendered Goddess - she was born from the head of Zeus after he swallowed the Titan Metis. She's butch, but a woman all the same, and I consider her a spiritual sister. Hecate is queen of the underworld and witches and I consider her my spiritual grandmother. Cybele is a nature Goddess, who gives boons and retribution with even serves. And Cybele had a son Attis, who became her adopted daughter. In ancient times both Hecate and Cybele had transgendered priestesses in their services. They were castrated males who lived as women thereafter. Cybele's were known as the Gallae, and I am a Galla in her service. Our symbol is the labrys, which in ancient times were used in religious dances to draw blood.

And what is a sub-genius? It's a follower of an authentically bogus religion at the head of which is a mythical character of J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs. The whole thing is both a joke and deadly serious. To be Sub-Genius is to be outrageous, heretical, religious, laid back, cynical and sincere all in one. "Bob" promises eternal salvation or triple your money back! It's a way of using humour in dealing with the world. It doesn't matter if you can't get the joke, it's there all the same. Anyway, there are four sub-genii gender sets: Male-Male (Overman); Female-Female (Overwoman); Male-Female (FeMale 2) and Female-Male (Male 3).

My pagan name is 'Polychrome, daughter of two rainbows', a Galla of the Goddess; and my Sub-Genius church name is 'Octobriana Oberwoman', a FeMale to Yetinsyn, Now the whole point of having these religions is that they fill up a spiritual vacuum within me. Paganism does this in a sincere fashion. Sub-Genius does it as a joke, and is valuable in my retaining my sense of humour. Either way, they provide me with alternative labels for myself. In Paganism I'm a maiden or crone (never a mother I'm afraid, except to my pet dog Pegasus), in Sub-Genius I'm a Yetinsyn. And the sources for those labels are not dependent upon other people's opinions, but my own.

Transcendence

The thing about dealing with such labels is not that they exist, but in how they are considered. Labels have power over people when it is assumed that they are natural and uncontested states of being. But the truth is that labels, including that of women and men, are social constructs. By realising this, and being conscious that each is only a marker, I believe that it's possible to raise above the definitions proscribed by them. In such a way it's still possible to embrace them, but in a healthy fashion.

What often happens with girls like myself is that we have reassignment surgery on the quiet, and then discretely return as if nothing has happened and that we were like this all along. In the process of gender transition, in which reassignment surgery is seen as the conclusion, our real histories disappear. This happens because we seek to pass as female women, Instead of ourselves - male women. I'm not going to do this.

In my visual arts studies I've considered pursuing performance art as a career option. In my research I came across Orlan. Now Orlan creates performance art by having plastic surgery on her face and body and presenting that in video format. She reads prose and poetry, philosophy, and indulges in theatrics other than the surgical ones in this process. She has made statements such as "I am a man and a woman" and "I am a female-female transsexual".

I realised I could do the same on at least one occasion. Earlier this year a birth was broadcast on the Internet (and later the reassignment surgery). I think I can do better than just documenting the affair. I have envisioned making my own reassignment surgery a performance piece, broadcast on the Internet with readings from Bornstein, Money, Stone, Raymond, Tavis and Wolfe. And there is a point to this.

By doing so, I get what I desire in several ways. I get a set of genitals that will finally match my internal body image. But I also avoid the trap of erasing myself in the process. And I have an opportunity to highlight and explore the nature of the self and the body in the manner that Orlan does.

I have no idea if I'll realise this ambition. Annie Fox in the same edition of *Venereology* as Murray makes an observation that there are two types of transsexuals - those who choose a private path and those that make a public statement. As an artist who cannot divorce her own issues and self from her creative work, I cannot possibly see how I can be anything but the later.

It'll be fun finding out.

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