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Gatekeepers

Who's life is it anyway?

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The problem is that there is such a power imbalance and if the therapist doesn't know what he or she is doing, they can inflict intense damage on their client during this incredibly vulnerable time.

When I attended

undergraduate school at Berkeley in the mid 1990s, I was a re-entry student. I had transferred from Laney, a community college in Oakland after two years there.

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Postmodernist thought was all the rage back then and I had to play catch up to attempt to understand writers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. I'm not sure I ever did understand them but their works continue to provoke me. Foucault was incredibly critical of power and how various institutions create definitions of normative behaviour and how those institutions police behaviour.

If one of the goals of education is to provoke thought and deepen a student's analysis, then at least one of the goals was met for me in undergraduate school. I'm surprised how many times I find myself thinking of Foucault's writings in every day life. Even once when I was in gaol after a protest, I was

sitting in my gaol cell at 850 Bryant thinking that Foucault would have been fascinated with the architecture of the gaol. Foucault wrote extensively about prisons and how architecture was used to enforce power. In the new gaol, they don't have bars on the cells and the sheriffs are on a platform overlooking a circular area that has cells surrounding the platform.

The sheriff is able to see every inch of your cell and every inch of the entire area. And while there are no bars on the cells, there is no privacy at all. The gaze of the sheriff is constant and incredibly powerful and acts as the bars would. When you have to go to the bathroom, you stand at the edge of your cell, wave at the guard to ask for permission, and then go only after being waved on.

Foucault focused on several institutions, including the history of psychiatry, prisons, and schools. Over the centuries, these institutions have frequently been used in troubling ways and I believe they still are, psychiatry being one that is incredibly pernicious since it is ostensibly meant to be helpful. His critiques of psychiatry helped me to understand how culturally and historically specific our ideas of what is good or bad normative behaviour. I remember when homosexuality was considered a mental illness. Actually by some, it still is.

There are those who are still doing what is called 'conversion therapy', a treatment that is supposed to help people overcome their same-sex attraction. Years of advocacy by lesbian and gay activists led to the American Psychiatric Association declaring that homosexuality was not a mental disorder.

I'm sorry to report though that they still consider being transgender to be a mental disorder. The 'good' psychiatrists want to cure us by giving us medical treatment that allows us to have our bodies be consistent with how we perceive they should be. The 'bad' psychiatrists try and cure us by making us understand why we should stay the gender we were assigned at birth. Transgender teenagers have even undergone shock therapy by the so-called helping profession to help them 'understand' normative gender. Right? Thanks!

So forgive me, but I was a little suspicious when I learned that I was supposed to go to therapy for six months to get testosterone ten years ago when I came-out. I saw and continue to see this as a question of control of your own body, kind of like abortion. The decision that I make about my body is mine, not that of some stupid kid barely out of school who wants to write a paper on me cuz, well, gee, they don't have trans people back in Wisconsin. I didn't go. I just walked in, looked the doctor in the eye, and told him to give it to me. He did. That was over ten years ago and since then I went off testosterone and now am back on again. What is shocking to me is that there are those who still have to go to therapy to get testosterone.

I'm on this chat board for F.T.M. folks from all around the country and I read how psychiatrists are torturing them for six months. Now granted, it is clear to me that many of the folks who start out on testosterone are emotionally fragile. Jesus! How could you not be when you are going through such a major change? And it isn't like most folks haven't gone through extremely difficult emotional challenges all of their lives.

The problem is that there is such a power imbalance and if the therapist doesn't know what he or she is doing, they can inflict intense

damage on their client during this incredibly vulnerable time. So if I seem a little protective of my transgender brothers and sisters, well, I am. A lot!

You have to go through this because of the Dr. Harry Benjamin standards of care. Dr. Harry Benjamin was the first 'medical expert' on transsexuals. Now, don't get me wrong here, but I do have a fondness for Dr. Benjamin, despite him being, as historian Susan Stryker called him, a paternalistic advocate and expert. His work both helped and undermined the transgender movement by making it possible for people to transition medically but also giving the medical profession immense power over our lives, making the doctor the gatekeeper to our becoming who we are.

Now we all hate gatekeepers until we become one, and then we think, well, we will do it better. Chances are we won't. Granted we will all try our best, but it is human nature to make mistakes, to go too far, even by accident. So given that I'm not a big fan of the model we have in place now. I don't trust the gatekeepers and history has shown them to be wrong over and over again about the most basic things. And given that most trans folks are poor, they can't afford a good therapist nine times out of ten. They end up going to some barely graduated, cheap therapist who doesn't know what they are doing. But gosh, aren't we grateful that someone out there is taking care of us? Well, no. Thank you very much but we can take care of ourselves.

Words are pretty hard to come by to describe how grateful I am for having people like you in my life. And I want to say thank you for having you behind me the last few months, the last few years. A lot happened and I also want to say thanks for all that you have all taught me. I'm a pretty lucky guy.

Robert Haaland

From BeyondChron: 📍Robert Haaland grew up in the U.S. Midwest, and moved to San Francisco after being kicked out of his home by parents terrified of the then-misunderstood AIDS virus. Haaland had come out as a homosexual when he was eighteen, and his family was scared that he would give them the deadly virus.

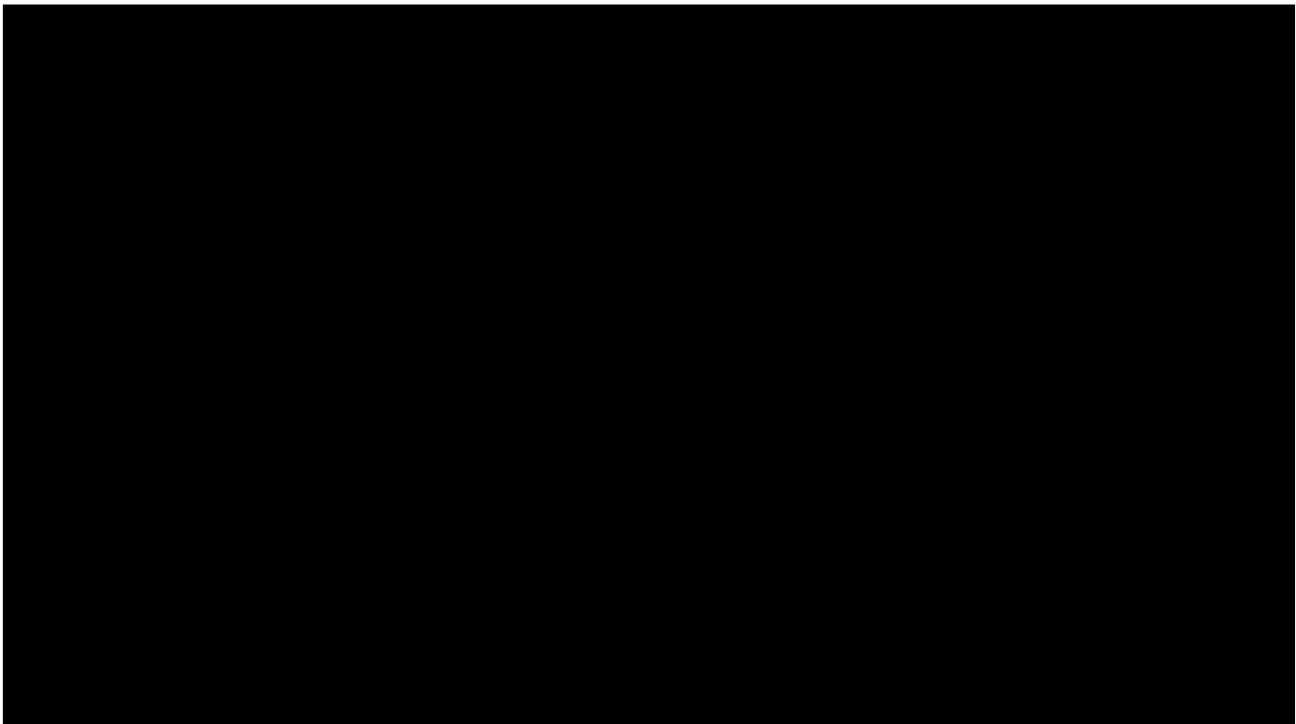


After arriving in San Francisco, he worked a succession of jobs - in the Conservation Corps, as a park ranger, and as a volunteer fireman - before enrolling in Laney College. From Laney, he transferred to U.C. Berkeley, and from there to Hastings Law School.

At Hastings he participated in a well-known civil justice clinic that trained students to become radical lawyers. The clinic focused on community-based organizing, and as part of the program Haaland participated in some tenants rights organizing and in the fight for affirmative action. He quickly became hooked on activism, "I loved it" he said, "And I became totally disinterested in becoming a lawyer".

Upon graduating Hastings in 1996, Haaland came out as transgender. He said he struggled for a while after coming out, as some of his friends had problems with his decision. The decision to come out also pushed him further away from practicing law. "As a transgender person, you don't just go in to some big law firm downtown and get hired" he said.

In 1999 he was elected as vice-president of the Harvey Milk Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Democratic Club, and then served as the club's president for 2003-04.



Named a "Local Hero" by the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* in 2001, Robert Haaland was also Co-Chair of San Francisco Pride at Work, and became the first transgender candidate to win public election in San Francisco history, as an elected member of the San Francisco Democratic Central Committee. He has served on that body since 2002. In 2003, he was received an award from

the Alice B. Toklas L.G.B.T. Democratic Club for his work in building coalitions.

In the video above, Robert reads a letter to his father as part of the Men's Story Project.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.