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## Gender Mirrors

### Do You See a Man? A Woman? A Transgender Person?

by Gianna E. Israel

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Gianna E. Israel

**H**ave you run into the gender mirror lately? What happened when you looked at your reflection? Did you see a man, woman, transgender person? Sometimes looking at our reflection can be disappointing, other times exhilarating.

*I grew to enjoy seeing those masculine traits as long as they didn't cause problems*

A lot happens each time we look into any mirror. Certainly we see our reflection. However if we linger long enough we can also see other things. Seeing one's reflection can spark memories of who we are and where we've been. This includes our disappointments and successes perhaps. Our reflection can also spark ideas about what and where we would like to be in the future.

Many transgender men and women feel very dissatisfied when they look in the mirror. Occasionally seeing the remnants of their previous gender role may make them feel regrets for what they could not experience in their former lives. Some also feel bad about remnants of their old gender because of others' opinions. They may have been told that they didn't give their original gender role a chance to work, and so try to fit in, making their life more difficult.

As a transgender woman I am quite pleased to have lived as myself, as a woman, for many of the past years. Before then, for a number of years, I disliked looking in the mirror and seeing traits of masculinity. However as my life became more settled I grew to enjoy seeing those masculine traits as long as they didn't cause problems. After all, how many women could profess to having both pretty and tomboyish traits.

Granted, I realise some people may view my reflections as different. There are occasions when looking in the mirror can be acutely painful. For some, the gender may be wrong. Or, perhaps a person's facial structure isn't as wished. Sometimes a person may just be having a bad hair day. There are other reasons why it can be hard to look in the mirror. These can include some outside reason, or possibly some inner hurt not noticeable by others.

Can you think of outside reasons a person may not like looking in the mirror? If you are like many of my clients and myself, I bet you can list half a dozen reasons. At the top of the list is harassment and persecution. It's sometimes hard to feel good while looking in the mirror while much of the world is saying we look ugly, deviant, or should die. Those people are giving us the message that they don't care about our feelings and that is emotionally devastating at times.

Some of the internal or inside reasons a person may find it painful to look in the mirror are easy to understand. A person may not feel comfortable with their gender presentation because of its newness. Or, the person may suffer from depression or lack of confidence. The fact is, it isn't easy being transgendered. Building the self-esteem needed to feel good about yourself when the world is against you is very hard work! There are a lot of issues to focus and think about before feeling good about oneself is possible.

One of the questions I encourage my counselling clients to ask when they look in the mirror goes as follows: Is this a person I find lovable and respectable? If the answer is yes, you have a head start into asking that others treat you with the same respect that you give yourself (and hopefully others). However, if the answer is no, you would be well-served to keep looking in the mirror until you can pinpoint lovable and respectable traits unique to you.

Sometimes it isn't possible to find an overwhelming number of lovable and respectable traits immediately. I know personally, during difficult times I may have felt comfortable with my gender identity, however finding other positive traits wasn't so easy. It took several serious minutes of reflection. Sometimes I found it necessary to call a friend I trust and tell them I was having an identity crisis.

An identity crisis happens most frequently when you look in the mirror and say, who or what the hell is that? Is that a freak? Is that a complete stranger? During times like this don't call 911! Instead, remind yourself that you are not alone in the search for who you are. Everyone else does the same thing, sooner or later, transgender or not. Take time to learn what is good about yourself. Once you figure a few positive things out, tape a note or list right next to your mirror. Think about what the list says, and become accustomed to feeling and seeing what is good about you.

I like self-identity mirror exercises. Perhaps the neatest one goes as follows. Some mornings before you put on your clothing and face for the day, take a moment to look in the mirror. This nude reflection you see is who you really are. You are that much a man, woman, transgender person and human. What I like most is that we can add to and take away from various presentations and appearances. We are gifted with the ability to transition from wild and exotic to sensible and sociable in a manner of minutes with just a change of wardrobe and make-up. Learn to recognise this flexibility in yourself. Take into consideration the fact that the more flexible and willing to change that you are, the more adaptive you will become while dealing with life's circumstances.

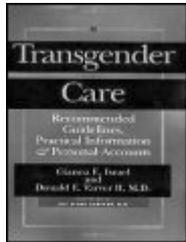
## Gianna E. Israel

**From Susan's Place:**  Gianna E. Israel was a therapist and author of many online articles regarding transsexuals and gender transition as well as the 1997 book *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts*.



She also published numerous articles on transgender issues, including a regular column in the magazine, *Transgender Tapestry*, and a series of gender articles which are published on Usenet and in C.D.S. Publication's TG Forum. Her writings on gender issues had a significant impact on the field and had an enormous impact on many people's lives. She spent nearly 20 years providing gender-specialized counselling, evaluations, medical recommendations, and mental health services across the United States. She even offered appointments by telephone for individuals without local support or who found office visits difficult. She was a member of H.B.I.G.D.A. and worked with thousands of transpersons in all stages of transition. She passed away on 21 February 2006 after a long illness and is a sorely missed supporter of the trans community.

A full list of her essays on the "[Differently Gendered](#)"  website



**Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts**  
Author: Gianna E. Israel, Donald E. Tarver and Diane Shaffer  
Publisher: Temple University Press (1998)  
I.S.B.N.-13 978-1566398527.

**From Amazon Books:**  By empowering clients to be well-informed medical consumers and by delivering care providers from the straitjacket of inadequate diagnostic standards and stereotypes, this book sets out to transform the nature of transgender care. In an accessible style, the authors discuss the key mental health issues, with much attention to the vexed relationship between professionals and clients. They propose a new professional role; that of "Gender Specialist".

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide definitive information (in the context of consulting health professionals) on hormone administration, aesthetic surgery, and genital reassignment surgery. Chapter 6 takes up the little-examined issue of H.I.V. and AIDS among transgender people. There is also a chapter devoted to issues of transgender people of colour, as well as a chapter on transgender adolescents. The book contains a wealth of practical information and accounts of people's experiences about coming-out to one's employer or to one's friends or spouse. Several essays spell out the legal rights of transgender people with regard to insurance, work, marriage, and the use of rest rooms. The second part of the book consists of thirteen essays on a range of controversial topics.

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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.