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Riding the Bus

Sometimes Life's Lessons and Rights Apply Across Various Lines and Effect All People

by Gianna E. Israel

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On 1st December 1955, Ms. Rosa Parks walked into history when she refused to give up her seat for a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. She was arrested for her defiance, and challenged segregational riding policies in court. Although her local court challenge failed, it brought light to the situation and sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. "For a little more than a year, we stayed off those busses. We did not return to using public transportation until the Supreme Court said there shouldn't be racial segregation," Ms. Parks said.

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Except in the case of the elderly or disabled, can you imagine being forced by law to give up your seat on the bus for another person? Or, for that matter not being able or allowed to ride a bus because you have a transgender-identity? Any discriminatory abuse of public accommodation doesn't seem very likely these days, yet for some transgender individuals riding public transportation is a fearful experience because of potential harassment, discrimination or even violence. And, surprisingly, with the preceding knowledge, I routinely encourage transgender clients to ride public transportation as a therapeutic homework assignment for a variety of reasons.

Why do I encourage transgender people who have begun living in role part or full-time to ride the bus? Because it is a person's right to have unhampered access to public accommodations. Participating in society also builds character. Riding the bus, train or commercial airplane can initially be a challenge. It's a free therapy lesson, especially if you live in a middle to large sized city. Gone are the tinted car windows, late night drives and slipping out of the garage after the neighbours have gone to work. Riding the bus, or similar ventures, requires face to face contact with others. I remember for me that at first it felt a lot like riding the school bus for the first time when I was in elementary school.

These days I enjoy my right to ride the bus, well actually I hate it so I ride the train, instead. And, like so many other transgender persons, we enjoy the right to use public accommodations, participate in the workforce and contribute to society. In some sense, these little bold acts forward are immersive. Its kind of like jumping off into the deep end of the swimming pool, and not wading in at the beginner's end. Well, actually, it would be reasonable to take precautions before engaging in any first time experience. Decide to ride a bus route that you believe to be safe. And, when you get on, keep in mind that you have as much right to be on the bus as anyone else. If you didn't, the bus driver would have told you to get off or sit in the back.

Clients often tell me that one of their biggest fears in riding the bus is being looked at strangely or verbally harassed by teenagers. It is with public situations such as these that a person's coming-out and social interaction skills are put to the test. Are you going to allow some stranger or youngster to interrupt and ruin your day? Would you allow a younger brother or sister to treat you disrespectfully? I would hope not. Like everyone else, the rules needed to survive an ordinary bus ride really don't change too much if you are transgender. Mind your own business, and if someone starts minding yours without an invitation either ignore it or tell that person to go find a new victim to victimize. The later is especially true if someone starts using bad words to describe you.

Many transgender also experience being read or clocked on the bus, typically by youngsters. Generally if these are teenagers, its probably okay to ignore them or ask if they wanted to ask you a question. Sometimes however your transgender status may be noticed by a child, who in turn will often ask a parent if you are a man or a woman. Like all humans, these young persons are simply being curious of the world around them. It's okay to tell them you are a person who is different, if the parent directs the child's question to you. Less frequently a parent will explain to their child that you are a bad type of person, and if you feel comfortable doing so tell the parent that he or she is both wrong and rude.

If you are inexperienced riding the bus or using other public accommodations as a woman, there are a few first time advice you may find helpful to know. Have your ticket or change ready, so that you are not pulling everything out of your purse when you board. Keep in mind to zip or latch closed your purse to prevent theft. Remember that some tight, long skirts make it difficult for boarding. And, don't always expect men to generally step aside or give up their seats in big cities. I've found the best way to guarantee I get off the bus first, is to not look at anyone in the face, and just keep walking and moving forward, so that people see me coming and generally move out

of my way.

As you enjoy all the bouncing, jostling and excitement of public transportation, keep in mind that you are an ambassador to the transgender community as a whole. Certainly, you have the right to ride the bus like everyone else, but it behooves you to know that if people notice you that they will also notice your behaviour. And, in all likelihood, pass judgement on transgender people in a general sense. Good behaviour in a public sense helps insure that when transgender people have a face to face encounter, such as at a job interview, these individuals may be given a chance to speak and be treated respectfully.

If during your ride on the bus you encounter harassment, keep safety in mind first. If telling a person to leave you alone fails, then ask the driver for help. And, if that fails, after memorizing the driver's badge or bus number, ask to be let off the bus immediately. Then, if your attempts to dispel harassment failed, call the police and/or file a report with the appropriate transportation authority. These same steps also can be used when encountering harassment or discrimination with other public accommodations.

During 1977 when Ms. Rosa Parks was interviewed about her experiences ending discrimination for black men and women on the busses in Montgomery, Alabama. She said, "I would like to be known as a person who is concerned about freedom and equality and justice and prosperity for all." That is a beautiful sentiment, and one we as transgender persons can believe for ourselves. We need to feel good about ourselves and our role in society, and this is true when we ride the busses or pursue other activities which fit our needs and liking.

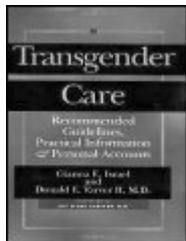
Gianna E. Israel

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.