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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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Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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