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# A Personal Commentary on Harry Crawford

## How I Came-Out to My Book Club

by Kerry

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This book critique was sent to the members of my book group a week or so before we talked about *Eugenia*. There were a few who already knew I am F.T.M. and I discussed it with them first. We have a few older and rather conservative members and I was not sure about their reaction. But all went well. In fact, the one person I was most worried about was most supportive and asked many questions which are also attached. I made some slight modifications to the original to preserve some anonymity.



Harry Crawford

**T**his book affects me personally and I was not sure at all what my comments would or could be to our group and I have agonised about this.

So here goes: I am, like Eugenia, a transsexual, although I do not like this term since it has connotations that might be considered unsavoury. Being trans has nothing to do with sleazy sex or sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation means being attracted either to the opposite or same sex partner and affects trans people just as it affects any other part of the population. But it can also complicate relationships immensely, as Eugenia's situation proved.

As to the sleazy bit, many people still associate transpeople with the red light district, drag shows and prostitution. And it has to be admitted that a number of transpeople can be found in this milieu. But this is not because they are specifically attracted to this. It is often caused by desperation; by drug taking to alleviate suffering and by problems of finding another source of income and leading a normal life.

***As for Eugenia and me, we are both transsexuals. Just because one does not have an operation or take hormones does not mean one is not transsexual.***

It appears that female-to-male transpeople, like Eugenia and myself, tend to be less visible.

Having been brought up and socialised as females and with the female hormones in our body to start off with, rather than being testosterone driven, we tend to 'pass' much more easily than male-to-female transsexuals. To pass means to become invisible as a transperson and lead a seemingly 'normal' life as Eugenia did for twenty-two years. That does not mean that female-to-male transpeople don't suffer just as much as their male-to-female counterparts; but they suffer in different ways, because of the way society functions.

The suicide rate among transpeople is still much above the average and I for one do not know any transperson who hasn't thought about ending it all more than once and many have tried.

I do know about transpeople here in Australia who did commit suicide, but I did not know them personally.

Matters have much improved since Eugenia's day. I feel confident enough to tell you about myself without fearing ostracism or being burned at the stake.

Let me make this very clear: this condition is not a life choice, one is born with it. I knew from about age three that I was somehow different.

I had immense problems with my mother about what a good little girl should be, I hated frilly pink outfits, hated dolls and basically was a tomboy. When I finished high school my mother did her utmost to marry me off, even without consulting me. It was one of the major factors that caused me to end up here in Australia [I am a migrant], to get away from her interference with my life. And yet, I do know that she actually meant well, that she tried to do the best for her wayward and strange daughter. Neither she nor I knew then what was affecting me. For many years I thought I was some unique freak, because I was not like other females. I did not want to get married and have children. I was not interested in good housekeeping, Princess Di and the latest summer fashions. I despised everything that *Women's Weekly* stood for, or at the least I found it boring.

And yet, as all of you in the book group know I married and still am married. This was because there was one big difference between

Eugenia and myself and that is to do with sexual orientation.

I was not attracted to females, but to males. On the surface this meant I was 'normal' in the eyes of society, involved in a hetero relationship, but this was only on the surface. I had problems with my female role. In particular when it came to the physical side of marriage, I hated to play the female part, it just felt wrong. But of course I did not have the body to do otherwise. And more importantly I thought that in order to have a loving and meaningful relationship with another human being this was the price I had to pay.

As it says in the introduction to *Eugenia*: "she sought what almost all of us seek: love, acceptance, security, respect and connection with other human beings".

Nowadays Eugenia might well have drifted into the lesbian community, as many female-to-male transpeople do in the first instance. But because I was not attracted to females, it took much longer for me to find my solution. I never stopped looking for an explanation of my strange feelings and eventually started to realise what my situation was around the mid to late 1990s, when internet searching became available. But in my case it took until 2006 and much agonising before I made the decision to at least partially transition (testosterone and chest reconstruction).

What forced the issue was that I had severe menopausal problems including deep vein thrombosis from oestrogen. This eventually led to a hysterectomy which had nothing to do with my being trans. But it is hard to convey how I despised my female body during this time. And yes, I was depressed and suicidal. I was extremely lucky to find a very sympathetic social worker/counsellor who helped me through this.

Of course, it was an ordeal to have to tell my husband who did not take kindly to the situation.

But we sorted it out and we both decided that we are far better off together than apart. We are very close friends and companions and it is the closest relationship both of us have with anybody. A relationship that lasts through transition is rare, many couples (including lesbians) split up and the break is often acrimonious. The partner of a transperson usually feels betrayed. It is hard for them to understand that their companion is still the same person; the only difference being that now their true gendered self is openly expressed rather than being suppressed.

For transpeople there usually comes a time when they cannot go on pretending to be what they are not, because it is pretence, a role-play, make-believe. There was always a part of me that hated it and I also hated myself for doing it, for going along with it. But I felt I had no choice, the alternatives were worse, in particular the fear of being an outcast, unloved and friendless, rejected by society.

For the sake of my husband's family and his parents in particular, I can't transition completely (grow a moustache, for example). It is not easy.

I feel that I have to live with a split personality, a split identity. But it is much preferable to what I had to endure before.

This is also the real reason why I changed my name. Kerry is unisex and it was the best I could do with my original given name for my new birth certificate in my country of origin. I told them I wanted to 'anglicise' my name.

Transitioning is a mind numbing fight with bureaucracy even now. He or she? Mr, Mrs, Ms. In my case none of the above (not yet). This is when I started to realise fully how gender restrictive our society still is, and how gender biased.

And lastly, all of this is the reason why I have problems finding a job, although I have tried TAFE, volunteering and university.

To end on a positive note: Ever since I made a start with transition I have felt so much more at ease with myself. All my friends and relations both here and in my home country who know about me have been very supportive about it and I am very grateful for this. I truly feared rejection so very much, but society is getting better. There is more information available and prejudice and discrimination are receding and transpeople are not invariably seen as an aberration, unnatural and monsters as was the case in poor Eugenia's day.

If you have any questions for me, please don't hesitate to ask. The more people know and understand what it is like to live as a transperson, the easier it will be for us.

Following the book group meeting the questions below were sent to me by one of the group members, but others asked me similar questions.

I provide these questions and answers as an example of what the non-trans community think about us when they are confronted with the real thing.

## Gender Identity

**Question:** In my head it took me a while to break the habit of automatically thinking of you as [my original first name] to thinking of you as Kerry. Would you now like us to think of you as a male? I hope you don't find this question offensive. I'm posing the question because I would like to do whatever makes you most comfortable.

**Answer:** This is very difficult for me to answer at this point, because I feel neither female nor male, but in limbo or transition, as we say. Because I started transition so late in my life it is very hard to change lifetime habits, even if they were mainly pretence. I assume you would agree it is always easier to go with the flow rather than swim against the stream. Of course I have a reputation for swimming against the stream anyway, which started in my childhood and involved school and work, not only the relationship with my mother. I guess I had the mind of a male and was certainly more assertive than most women. Certainly men felt challenged by it. It is also extremely stressful to be 'different' and even I can handle only so much, so at times I choose to go with the flow. Probably the best

answer to your question is start thinking of me as male because this is the direction I want to take. As I explained, my husband's family and my parents-in-law hold me back. My husband is also more comfortable that way. He has accepted me but he still does not want to talk about the whole trans business if it can be avoided. He is still somewhat uncomfortable with it and I don't want to push it.

**Question:** As you said in your excellent exposition there are more males that move to become female.

**Answer:** Not quite. I said that the female-to-male transpeople, like me, are less visible. This does not mean there are fewer of them. Yes, there are still some gender experts who think that F.T.M. are fewer in number, but the figures have been steadily converging towards parity. It makes sense. Think about the impact and visibility of men in society versus women (particularly in historical times). Obviously that does not mean that there are, or ever were, far fewer women in the world. And do not forget that all this involves the questions of power and status in society.

**Question:** An army man wanted to resign recently because he was having a gender reassignment. His commanding officer refused to accept his resignation and was happy for him to change from Malcolm to Michelle. As Michelle, she was interviewed by Geraldine Doogue who previously knew this person as Malcolm. Geraldine didn't hide the fact that she was gobsmacked but made it clear that she was very accepting of the change.

**Answer:** Yes, it is hard to accept that some men deliberately give up their manhood and all the status privileges that come with it ... but it also proves that the decision to assert one's true gender identity is not a lifestyle choice or a whim, but a heart-breaking struggle. Nobody in their right mind would do this if not driven by something beyond their control. By the way, to be accepted for any kind of transition process (hormones, operation), you have to see a psychiatrist to verify that you are genuine and not deluded or mentally ill.

**Question:** At [my husband's] golf club a male greenkeeper is undergoing a gender reassignment. No one in this conservative environment seems concerned.

**Answer:** Great to hear that, that's real progress.

**Question:** My husband tells me he still thinks of this person as male - out of habit.

**Answer:** This is what I indicated above ... Advertisers of any brand of rotary clothes line have trouble shifting people from the habit of thinking of all rotary clothes lines as Hill Hoists (which was the first one on the market). The same goes for Victa, the first rotary lawn mower. What you first know something (or someone) as tends to stick.

**Question:** I had never thought about it before but I guess the person involved has to signal when they want to be addressed or thought of as her or him.

**Answer:** Yes and no. For me, see above. And what you say applies definitely to one's family and friends, workplaces and even book groups. In other words, one should signal this to all the people who have known one as somebody else. For the general public, however, as transpeople do their best to fit in, to assimilate, to 'pass', as we call it. You basically try to be accepted as the man or woman you really are. I have been called Sir and Madam on the same day ... that's my problem. If I could cultivate my facial hair, for example, that should do the trick.

## Transgender as a Definition

**Question:** Tell me if I'm wrong but before transgender was first used as a term in 1949 I think the term that was used was invert?

**Answer:** Yes. I am not sure about 1949, but Sigmund Freud, for example, used the term 'inversion' and so did his contemporaries. 'Transgender' is a kind of umbrella term and could include gender-queer, queer and transsexual. Anybody, in fact, who is gender identity questioning. It is not the same as transsexual. Terminology is still a problem and very much under discussion.

**Question:** If people associate the term transgender with sleaze, it's only because they don't know enough about it (or can't cope/or be bothered with thinking about it).

**Answer:** Yes.

**Question:** I disagree that you and Eugenia are both trans. The term transgender simply denotes someone who has undergone a sex change. Our poor Eugenia didn't have that option. Despite all her efforts at passing as a male there is no doubt that Eugenia remained female.

**Answer:** Well, I explained about the term transgender above. As for Eugenia and me, we are both transsexuals. Just because one does not have an operation or take hormones does not mean one is not transsexual. It is what you feel, your gender identity, a belief that one is born in the wrong body. It is also not a sex change. It is just aligning the innate gender identity with the outside body. Sometimes this is called gender affirmation, as it is really the process of affirming your true gender. Psychiatrists and psychologists have tried time and again to make people change their belief in their innate gender and all failed. There were some really cruel aversion therapy experiments, including electric shocks (all very similar to mental patients). There are some very rare cases where somebody asserts they have 'changed' (their inner conviction) but I for one believe it was not genuine, but heavily enforced by drugs and treatment. Or that these people were not genuine transsexuals in the first place.

## Emerging Identity

**Question:** When I read the very sad story of Eugenia I thought she realised she wanted to be a male person at too young an age.

**Answer:** As I said, I was about three when I realised I was somehow different. There was a particular incident, but I did not interpret it for what it was for many years. From what I have read, most transsexuals know something is different from a very young age, although in other cases it does not surface recognisably until puberty and, rarely, even later. And I should also emphasise that just because a girl is a tomboy for a while or a boy wants to play with girls' toys does not mean they are necessarily transsexual. Most children outgrow this phase.

**Question:** An issue that Tedeschi doesn't raise is that perhaps Eugenia was born with ambiguous genitalia and was incorrectly assigned. Ambiguous genitalia rates are 1 in 4,500 births. The majority are brought up as girls. Gender identity complications can occur about later in life.

**Answer:** Yes, the intersexed, formerly known as hermaphrodites. Yes, the birth incidence is fairly high but in many cases the symptoms are so light that people are not even aware of it. There are many reasons for being intersexed and therefore symptoms are also varied. As for being brought up as girls that is mostly correct until fairly recently: simply because it is easier to cut something off (a micro-penis for example) than add something on. And a baby obviously can't tell you if it wants to be a boy rather than a girl. This has now been brought forward as a human rights issue. That is, to perform this kind of surgery on an infant violates his or her rights. Then there are the parents, the family. Can you imagine them replying "we are not sure" when asked - boy or girl? There are some indications that transsexual is just a kind of ultimate version of intersex. Neurological differences have been found between the male and female brains. A male-to-female trans brain was found to have female attributes and vice versa. The sample is very small, however, since this can only be checked on dead people and there are not many transpeople who donate their brains to science.

**Question:** Perhaps gender reassignment will remain a middle-class privilege as I can't imagine a poor person could afford to undertake the procedure.

**Answer:** This depends on the operation and also the country you live in. In some countries the public health system supports gender reassignment. Not all operations are available in all countries. For example the lower genital operation for transpeople like me is not available in Australia. My chest reconstruction was supported by Medicare to a certain extent. It depends on the surgeon. There are not many medical people who do this kind of operation. There are some generous medicos who bulk-bill for some of their services or charge very little, because they know that many of us usually lose our jobs and are struggling financially and socially. The support in Sydney and other major cities is okay, but is not as satisfactory in remote or rural areas (and there is sometimes more discrimination and prejudice). Nor is it immutable. Like most social phenomena, it fluctuates.

## Employment Issues and Identity

**Question:** Gosh! Of course when you apply for anything you have to tick a male/female box on a form. Do you feel you have been discriminated against?

**Answer:** Yes. Most of us feel that way. It is still one of the major problems for transpeople.

**Question:** Theoretically, gender should not be an issue. But theory and practice are far apart aren't they?

**Answer:** Yes, very much so.

**Question:** Your Mum ...

**Answer:** Read Justice Michael Kirby's book (*Law, Love & Life*, Viking, Australia, 2012) and you will see how parents struggle to 'cure' a child's sexual orientation to what they regard as normal.

## Identity

**Question:** Going back to filling in forms - when we come to the box which asks occupation my husband happily fills in 'Retired'. I don't identify with retired and struggle with what to fill in. I loved it when I was at Uni and could proudly write student in the 'occupation' box.

**Answer:** I know that feeling ...

**Question:** I'm telling you this trivia to exemplify that, even with small issues; some of us struggle with our identity. I just can't imagine how difficult the identity issue has been for you - having to face it every day. You must feel very proud of yourself for having survived this struggle.

**Answer:** Yes, identity is not only gender based. Think about migrants for example, or religion or any group activities (sports fans) ... or politics! In my studies identity was often associated with belonging. But other factors include status, money, power, education etc.

**Question:** Something else has just struck me. Who have you found have most trouble with your new identity, females or males?

**Answer:** Males, probably. I am a challenge to their 'manhood' and there is also the homophobic element for those who associate with homosexuality.

**Question:** Please feel free to ignore my questions if you feel I have overstepped the mark. I will not be offended at all. I'm simply interested in understanding. I'm sure you must get sick of talking about it!

**Answer:** No problem. The more people know, the greater their understanding, I hope.

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