

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

Coming Out Whole

A Buddhist Teacher Gives Up Hiding

by Caitriona Reed

Article appeared in Polare magazine: August 1998 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Caitriona Reed, Senior Teacher in Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Inner-Being at Manzanita Village Retreat Centre in San Diego County, California, U.S.A.

This past April I gave up hiding. The energy I had been using to maintain a life of secrecy was exhausted. I could no longer bear to live with the fear and shame that had haunted me. I let it be known that I am a transgendered person, a transsexual. I came-out of the closet!

Where does this leave me? I've spoken the words, declaring myself to be a transgendered person. I have painted my nails and painted my face. Every day I move a little further into this newfound freedom.

For about sixteen years I have taught Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. For the last eight years or so it has been my main occupation, my job description. Although I have been 'out' among certain friends for about twenty years, to truly come-out of the closet has always meant coming-out within my community of students and fellow teachers. Only now do I realise how incomplete I have been because I have not had the courage to do that. The whole process of my transition, whatever that might turn out to be, has been on hold.

I, like all of us, have been afraid. Fear makes us lie. It cripples us, even though we may get comfortable enough to move around within the confines of our deceptions. Then we end up inhabiting them, and they become an invisible shell that we drag around with us. I wandered, lost in obsession and fantasy, not knowing where my secret would lead me. I couldn't imagine it would lead anywhere but to more shame and to rejection by the people I cared for. I started to come-out once, over ten years ago, and began to make a transition. My fear quickly drove me back into the closet.

I assumed that an apparently intelligent male person, a literate person, a spiritual person (a Buddhist teacher, for goodness sake!) could hardly be taken seriously in a dress. After all, wasn't I supposed to have smoothed out all the rough edges and transcend desires altogether? Perhaps if there were some demon desires still lingering, I should simply go away and meditate some more!

The assumptions we have about our gender are reinforced on a daily basis. We have layers of social, cultural and emotional conditioning, supporting our ideas of what it means to be masculine or feminine. For most of us, our designated gender is at the very core of who we think we are and goes largely unquestioned. We would question our race, cultural or economic station, religion, politics and just about everything else, before questioning our assumed gender.

The common assumption is that what you have between your legs is your gender, but there is a constellation of other factors, hormonal and behavioural, that make us masculine or feminine. What you have between your legs is sex (male or female). Gender (masculine or feminine) is between your ears; it is the whole of your life, your emotional and mental make-up, the way you present yourself in society, the way you interact with others, your imagination, the theatre of your being.

Sex is the American obsession, so it's not surprising that almost everything gets sexualized. The first thing people wonder about a transgendered person is how they have sex and who they have it with; but being transgendered may have as much to do with sex as riding a bike or baking cookies. Some of us are born male and feel we are women, some of us are born female and feel we are men. Some of us are gay, some straight, some asexual, some bisexual. We should avoid generalisations.

In recent years, the term transgendered has allowed a community, which includes cross-dressers, drag queens and transsexuals, to describe ourselves and to unite to gain recognition and civil rights. There is an increasing movement away from stereotyping and there is also an increasing demand that we be de-medicalised. The society that has confused gender identity with reproductive organs has little tolerance for variation. It's hardly surprising that someone not fitting the stereotypes is rejected as a freak. Personally, I would like to question the paradigm that insists I must be unmistakably either a man or a woman.

My earliest memories have to do with understanding myself to be a girl rather than, or perhaps as well as, a boy. I still have a scar from the brick that was thrown at me in kindergarten because I always played with the girls. It was, of course, the boys who objected and came to get me, bricks and sticks in hand.

Boarding school was a strange ordeal. Looking back at the ways I managed to compensate, I am amazed and saddened. For me, to be a man was to be afraid, angry and alone. I once wrote a poem titled 'I'd Rather be a Woman than Have to be Right'. There's something

about the burden of the stereotypical masculine role that always remained extremely uncomfortable, a barrier between myself and the world.

The Dharma, the practice of Buddhism, has been my refuge. For a while it was a way to be safe behind my wall. I never meant it to happen that way, but now my life, my heart, insist that I be honest. As the barriers disintegrate, I step out from behind them, just as I am. Of course, I have always been aware of the puritanism, homophobia and intolerance that lurk within Buddhism and within institutionalised spirituality in general, especially in America. The pomposity and posturing, the reluctance to come clean and be simple, honest and human is astonishing and utterly sad; and it still frightens me. Buddhism is not always the Dharma; just as the Church is not always Christian. Despite that, because of that, I step out anyway.

I still don't know where this road will lead. I have now resumed the use of hormones under medical supervision, after erratic self-medication for a number of years. If I end up undergoing sex reassignment surgery, it is not so much to cure the malady of Gender Identity Disorder, as it is to continue the celebration of life.

I am in a monogamous relationship with a woman, with whom I teach and to whom I am married. Michele and I are best friends. She has known who I am since we first came together seventeen years ago. I feel blessed that Michele and I have something much more akin to a partnership, in which we are strengthened by a mutual and ongoing determination to question all stereotypes.

Four months have gone by since my April coming-out. I could never have guessed the response I would get from friends in our community and now also from strangers as I teach around the world. "Thank you for coming-out. I feel I now have permission to be who I am", was a response I received from more than one person. "Thanks for challenging our expectations. That is your job, isn't it?" said one of my students. "This means we'll all have to come-out," said my friend and teacher Joanna Macy, with whom I had shared my secret years ago, but who had tears in her voice when I spoke to her on the phone about my coming-out. She was expecting the birth of her grandchild within the next day or two. She said, "Now I can celebrate two births." When I saw my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, he simply asked, "Do we call you 'Caitriona' now?"

Where does this leave me? I've spoken the words, declaring myself to be a transgendered person. I have painted my nails and painted my face. Every day I move a little further into this newfound freedom. I am undergoing intensive electrolysis to eliminate my beard. When I go out for the evening, it feels fine to put on my face and dress up. It doesn't feel like it's such a big deal anymore. So, what do I do now? Is my life doomed to become no more than a series of fashion statements? A little experiment in performance art? The first Buddhist teacher in America (that I know of) to be a transsexual? I don't pass as a woman, many transsexuals don't - but that is not the issue. Passing may mean going back into another closet, that same closet of unquestioning stereotypical identity. Even so, I am delighted to be called 'ma'am', especially when I'm not even trying to pass.

A part of my motivation in coming-out was to stand up and be counted. Knowing what it's like to hide, I hope to make it a little easier, by my example, for others to reveal themselves. Moreover, I wish to challenge the rigidity of gender stereotypes, which makes hiding necessary for the transgendered person in the first place, often for reasons of physical safety. If by not passing, by sticking out like a sore thumb even.

I have helped save the life of one transgendered suicidal teenager, who thought he was alone; or if one gender-phobic, homophobic thug is stopped in his tracks (because, after all, I am six foot two); or if one stranger, put at ease because I am at ease, catches my eye, and we smile and all fear is dissolved, for an instant, for both of us; then my life is being well spent.

There is still fear. Perhaps I will ultimately find myself lonely and despised. Perhaps this is proof, after all, that my 'spiritual' life has no validity, nor any real meaning. Perhaps, if I had attained successful insight into the nature of self, I would know that all this business about male and female, masculine and feminine, is just a dance of shadows.

Well, perhaps this is precisely what I do know, having devoted most of my life to exploring such things. Perhaps it is because that is what I know best, know in my bones, that I have the strength to come-out. Perhaps it is because I have come to an appreciation of impermanence and the breathtaking inter-connectedness of things that I have come to value the precious particularity of every detail of my being. I may lose a lot, I may even lose you as my friend, but I have reclaimed my life. Arrogant as it may sound, that is my gift for both of us.

How strange that organised religion has always aspired to express a certain androgyny of spirit yet insists on absolute physiological gender differentiation. To realise androgyny in our bodies is to challenge the status quo to its core. It is called the work of the Devil, or of Mara (a Buddhist counterpart). Why is desire considered so dangerous? Why is the body despised? Why do we give up the authenticity of our life to realise an invented God or a contrived Enlightenment? Is the fear of death so great that we must bargain away our natural wisdom, our sensuality and passion, our celebration and joy?

Is what I am doing skilful, is it harmful? Am I a fool to imagine anyone will take me seriously anymore? I am beyond caring. The soft echo of this moment is enough; the softness I feel in my body, the sweetness and energy inside me. Thanks to my teachers, thanks to life, thanks to my friends, thanks to the silver light of afternoon on the delicate leaves of the trees of the chaparral forest behind our house.

Life is given to us for free. How can we repay such a gift except with the fullness of our own life? What could be better than to return life entirely to itself? I can't hesitate any longer, nor delay my own freedom. I have chosen to be whole.

Caitriona Reed

From the Manzanita Lodge website: Caitriona Reed (formerly Christopher Reed) has studied with teachers in Asia, England and the United States since 1970 and has led retreats since 1981. She is a senior teacher

in Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Inner-Being and received formal authorisation as a teacher from him in 1992. With her partner Michele Benzamin-Masuda, she founded Ordinary Dharma in Santa Monica, California and Manzanita Village Retreat Centre in San Diego County, California. Their teaching is informed by the tradition of Engaged Buddhism and the deep ecology movement. Together they have developed a unique way of teaching, integrating the timeless practice of meditation, mindfulness practice and truth-telling, with contemporary environmental and social realities.



Caitriona, pronounced "Katrina", is the Irish/Celtic name her mother was to have given her. Visit Caitriona's [Five Changes](#)  website for more information

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.

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.