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Out of One Closet and into Another

Many Transgender People Choose to Live Stealth

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Joanne Herman

During Bree and Toby's road trip in the movie *Transamerica*, Bree arranges for both of them to stay at a friend's home in Dallas on the evening they pass through. Upon arrival, Bree is positively shocked to find her friend's living room filled with her transgender friends gathered for a social evening. Bree looks to her hostess in panic and whispers, "My friend told me you were stealth!"

... the difficulty and loneliness of essentially starting over, without a personal history and connections with the trans community, leaves [those that are stealth] depressed and despondent.

"Stealth": It essentially means living fully and completely in your true gender but never, ever admitting to be transgender. Think of it as the transgender version of "covering," which is the subject and title of Kenji Yoshino's thought-provoking recent book. In our case, it usually requires leaving your past behind. Your previous distinguished service as an F-4 Phantom pilot in Vietnam might be a tad difficult to explain as a woman, as was undoubtedly the case for American Airlines pilot Sara Weston.

Similarly, talk of your experience as a mother seems puzzling coming from you if you are a man. Living stealth can also require leaving behind family, friends, colleagues, and anyone

else who might out you.

So, why come-out of one closet only to step into another? The dangers facing "out" trans people were once so severe that stealth used to be part of the standard treatment protocol prescribed by professionals for those needing to transition genders. In fact, I have a friend who was forced twelve years ago to divorce from her spouse to accomplish her transition, in spite of having a healthy relationship and two children.

Fortunately, stealth is optional these days. Yet many still actively choose stealth to avoid the societal stigma, prejudice, and safety concerns that come with being an out transgender person.

Stealth is essentially a second closet, with all of the issues associated with being in a closet. Stealth is much harder to maintain when you are with other transgender people, because very slight gender incongruities in a single person can be overlooked, but in two or more gender-variant people in the same space, such details easily arouse suspicion. Bree had assumed that her friend had broken all ties with her trans friends in order to remain stealth, and when that was clearly not the case, she panicked, thinking Toby would quickly figure her out. He did.

Most people who are stealth are just so happy to be finally living in their true gender that all of the hassle is tolerated. But for a few, the difficulty and loneliness of essentially starting over, without a personal history and connections with the trans community, leaves them depressed and despondent.

Outsiders may interpret this heartache as meaning that transitioning genders had been a mistake for the person, when actually stealth was the mistake, albeit forced by the former treatment standards, stigma avoidance, and/or very real safety concerns.

It's also much harder to succeed at being stealth if you lack "privilege," which comes in many forms. It includes having the economic means to afford the surgeries that make your body and face appear more traditionally feminine or masculine.

Or having bodily size and features that are not out of normal range for the new gender. In this aspect I am privileged. For example, at 5ft. 9in., I am right at the level of tall non-transgender women. But many of my transwomen friends are considerably taller!

Privilege also includes being heterosexual in the new gender, as you can imagine. Here I am not privileged, although I did have mitigating circumstances.

I transitioned from straight male to transgender lesbian female. However, my late wife Barbara willingly and lovingly stayed with me through my transition until her death, essentially delaying my assimilation of my lesbian status until now.

And, of course, privilege includes being a white person in a racist society. People of colour face discrimination whether transgender or not, and that makes going stealth - finding a new job, securing housing, and accessing services all the more difficult. Trans people unable to get medical care might buy hormones on the street, increasing the likelihood of sharing needles and greatly increasing the risk of contracting Hepatitis C or H.I.V..

People of colour also unfairly face greater police scrutiny whether transgender or not, which increases the likelihood of being incarcerated. Many prisons provide neither hormones nor any other aspects of transgender health care, and that can trigger severe depression in trans prisoners. When transgender health care is provided in prison, the media like to report it as a frivolous waste of taxpayer dollars. Furthermore, because the laws remain hung up on whether one has had surgery, a transgender prisoner is far more likely to be put into a cell based upon anatomical sex without regard to gender identity or presentation. For those who are pre-op and don't desire or can't afford surgery, this housing policy is extremely dangerous. There have been many, many stories of trans prisoners who have been beaten and raped by other inmates or, incredibly, by prison guards themselves.

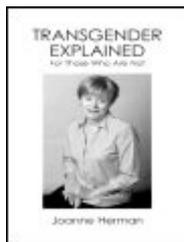
Because of all of these institutionalised oppressions, and because of the media's fondness for stories of the downtrodden, the public's image of the transgender population may be rather skewed. Varying degrees of stealth have allowed a lot of trans people to be successful in spite of these challenges, while being fairly invisible. A few of us have even been successful while being out as trans.

Joanne Herman

From the [Huffington Post](#) 📄 Joanne Herman is the author of *Transgender Explained for Those Who Are Not*, an easy-to-read primer on what it means to be transgender, suitable for parents, relatives, colleagues, friends, allies and even journalists.



Joanne is the first transgender member ever elected to the Boards of Directors of Point Foundation, the national L.G.B.T. scholarship fund, and Fenway Health, the largest L.G.B.T.-focused health and research centre in the world. Joanne is the first openly transgender member of the congregation of Old South Church in Boston, the same church where Benjamin Franklin was baptized and Samuel Adams served as a deacon, and where Joanne married her partner Theresa (Terry) Fallon in 2010. And Joanne is one of the first openly transgender alumnae of Dartmouth College, as a graduate of the last all-male class. Dartmouth's then-President Jim Wright awarded her a Class of 1975 diploma in her new name in 2006.



Transgender Explained For Those Who Are Not
Author: Joanne Herman
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From [Amazon Books](#): 📄 Joanne Herman, a transgender woman who read everything in sight to understand her own gender incongruity, has been helping others with her non-complicated explanations of transgender for almost a decade. Now she has written down her explanations for all to read in *Transgender Explained For Those Who Are Not*. Organized by topic into short, easy-to-read chapters, *Transgender Explained* is perfect for parents, relatives, colleagues, friends, allies and even journalists who want to quickly get up to speed on what it means to be transgender.

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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.