

# But How do I Tell My Parents, Workmates, Friends?

## Who to Tell, How to do it and the Right Tone to Adopt

by Katherine Cummings, Robin Goldstein & Jacob Hale

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... perhaps I should tell many people simultaneously ...

One of the problems which often faces transgender people about to transition is the problem of who to tell,

how to do it and the right tone to adopt. Because gossip can be damaging, inaccurate, and travels like wildfire, I believe one should try and tell as many people as possible simultaneously, so that garbling of the facts is minimised by the one person who can be authoritative ... you.

***Because gossip can be damaging, inaccurate, and travels like wildfire ...***

When I transitioned at Sydney College of the Arts, where I was Head of the Information Resource Centre, I sent around a memo to all the staff, telling them what I intended to do, and why. I also offered to be at my desk for the next two weeks to answer any questions and listen to any comments, before starting my journey of transition in earnest. About one in three of the staff responded, in person, by phone or in writing, and all the responses were positive.

Some time later an American friend of mine had the useful idea of gathering examples of 'transition letters' and creating an archive of them on the Internet, to help others who were on their way to transitioning and wanted examples of the kind of letters they might write to their families, their work colleagues and their friends.

I am attaching a few examples here, the first two written by a delightfully zany lawyer friend of mine named Robin Goldstein.

Below, please find my 'outing' letter. Actually it is two letters, a letter to my former law department friends at Sony (who heard about my 'change') and attached to that a second letter which was my 'grand' coming-out letter which I mailed off last 4th July under the heading 'Some Fireworks for the 4th'. That letter went to about 100 people and I received virtually nothing but support with some occasional confusion and no ill will (at least directly expressed towards me). Others in the community have said they find my writings amusing, so perhaps my letters will help someone else in their journey.

Dear first name,

Though we've all heard about the Information Superhighway, when I think of the fastest way of moving data I don't think of the Internet, or any of the other electronic communications channels which are being built by the phone and cable companies, but of the Sony Law Department where information moves at the speed of light, or faster (often without the associated illumination!)

Anyhow, I understand that you may have recently heard some rumours about me, my life and what I did during my summer vacation (or, as the book will be titled: 'R.D.G.s Excellent Adventure'.) Well, except for the part about the chimp and the case of Cool Whip, they're all true. However, to make sure that all my friends are starting from the same point, please allow me to share the attached letter with each of you. While Siskel and Ebert give the storyline two thumbs up ("A kind of 'Rain Man' meets 'Raiders of the Lost Ark'", The 'feel good' movie of the 1990s), those closer to me have more often remarked "Wow" or occasionally "You're kidding, right?!" ... Well, Wow is a pretty reasonable response, especially in light of the fact that "No, I'm not kidding!"

So please allow me to impose upon our friendship by offering the following as a way of sharing the knowledge that if you pick a destination and start walking towards it, though it may take more than thirty years, if you don't lose sight of your goal you will eventually get to where you are going.

Since I have no plans to appear on Phil or Oprah (though my agent is negotiating for a guest shot on *the Simpsons*), if you find yourself out this way (or even if you just find yourself), please don't hesitate to get in touch. Since leaving Sony I have lost over fifty pounds and though I will never be as beautiful as I would like (sigh), you can rest easy (hell, I can rest easy) that I don't look like Rich-in-a-dress. With respect to all other issues regarding my transition, as far as I can tell the journey from Richard to Robin has not affected my intelligence, ability, memory, or love of pizza and chocolate. I have, unfortunately, completely lost my sense of humour, but the doctors tell me that is a side-effect of taking oestrogen. Oh well ... some things are worth the sacrifice.

In closing then, I offer the words of my M.I.T. grad school roommate, with whom I recently shared the attached, and who, thereupon, remarked:

*"We always knew you were strange, and that was part of your charm. Now, I guess, you're just a lot more charming."*

Well said, Teddy. Truth *is* stranger than fiction!

Thanks for your friendship. Since this is not a 'secret' journey, please feel free to share these letters with whomever you think would benefit. Stay happy and healthy and please stay in touch.

With warmest regards,

Robin

... and to my friends ...

Dear Friends:

Although the increased use of e-mail and other forms of electronic communication have made the use of the written word popular once again, it is rare that such missives carry with them anything more than raw information and, perhaps, the occasional idea. I hope this letter will carry some emotion with it as well.

As many of you who have had the chance to be or speak with me over the past eighteen months know, the path my life has taken is certainly one for the record books. Multiple moves, multiple homes and multiple jobs were only cherries on the cake 'celebrating' my divorce from Carol after being together for more than thirteen years. But even these events pale in the light of self-discovery, and the process of finally coming to terms with a central issue which has been a troubling part of my life for as long as I can remember.

Two years ago, while living in Boston, a personal crisis brought me to the point of seeking counselling for a severe depression which had all but ended my life. Through therapy I began to unravel much of the pain and confusion which had made even the simplest things difficult and the most joyous occasions sad. And, in the middle of it all, amid the turmoil and depression, I finally admitted to my therapist, and most importantly to myself, that for my whole life I have felt at odds with my identity and social role as a male; that I have always felt that I should have been female. I thought that such a revelation would make me unique, but, late to my own party as usual, it turned out that this condition is well known and described in the literature as Gender Identity Disorder, or Gender Dysphoria, meaning an emotional state characterised by anxiety, depression and restlessness concerning one's own gender.

Well, labels are one thing, but being trained as an engineer and an attorney (oh yes, and as a city planner, whatever that is?) I was more interested in the 'what', the 'why' and the 'so what'.

As to the 'hat', I am a 'transsexual'. When being honest, it is clear that for as long as I can remember (certainly as far back as the age of three or four) I have had a strong female identity. I have always identified more closely with women and, given my 'druthers', would have chosen to grow up as a little girl rather than as a little boy. Of course, this did not happen. Rather, sensing from childhood that being 'different' was 'bad', this sense of incongruous identity was mostly repressed, resulting in what I now recognise to be a lifelong state of chronic depression. However, unlike the tabloid view of transsexualism (a misnomer, I believe, since my depression has always surrounded my gender identity and body image and not my sexual orientation), I have never seen myself as the classic 'women trapped in a man's body' - 'next on *Geraldo*'. Rather, I have, more generally, felt perpetually outside, inappropriate, uncomfortable and just plain wrong. At least once a day, every day, for over thirty years.

As to the 'why', this is less clear. Although you can never rule out being dropped on my head as a baby (this didn't happen, by the way ... I wasn't dropped on my head until at least fifth grade), current theories support the idea that a pre-natal hormonal imbalance within the developing infant's brain can result in certain senses of self-identification not being well formed or, in some cases, being formed counter to actual physical development.

No modern theory of transgendered behaviour finds a basis in 'faulty upbringing'. Rather, it is more likely that our brains are 'pre-wired' or pre-disposed to develop in a certain way and that this pre-disposition simply sets the stage, in the case of a such a hormonal imbalance, for an individual developing a cross gendered identity and associated behaviour.

Therefore, having reached that place where I now understand, and am at last comfortable with who I am, how I feel and how I may have gotten this way, I have arrived at a point in my life (and in this letter) where I need to address the more important (at least as far as I am concerned) issue of "So what do I do now". In discussing these issues with someone close to me, I was asked "Can't you just pretend you don't feel this way?" Well, to quote another famous person, "Been there, done that". In actuality, I realise I have spent my entire life pretending I didn't feel the way I do, only to have my true feelings reappear, up close and personal, in ways that could only be described as intrusive.

So, after moving west last year to the land of fruits, nuts and flakes thinking that a change in venue would 'cure' me (it didn't), and, having reached the opposite coast, struck with the realization that there was

literally no place further to hide, I re-entered therapy with a specialist in the area of Gender Dysphoria working here in the South Bay.

This has not been an easy process and, in many ways, has required that I break my life down to its most basic elements and rebuild it again without pretending to be what I'm not. But, with the love and support of my family and those friends to whom I have already come-out, on 1st June, Richard took one step back, and I began my new life living full-time as Robin Diane Goldstein.

As those who have seen me recently may have noticed, I don't look exactly the same as I did when I moved out to California last May (that dashing young associate for a major metropolitan law firm). These changes in my body and appearance will continue to become more visible as I work to bring my outer image and self-image into harmony. I don't have any preconceived notion of what I will look like at the end of this process, but it will definitely be happier, healthier and most clearly female. (To give you an idea of the power of this transformation on my physical being, I have been able to lose almost twenty-five pounds since the end of May, as I work to banish depression from my life forever.)

As far as other physical changes go, these are obviously personal and I will explore them with my therapist and my doctors, as appropriate. This process is not about a 'sex change' operation, which, under accepted medical standards and should it take place at all, is at least two years in the future. Rather, this process is about finding a sense of peace and happiness with who I am (the person I have always been), living within a body and in a gender role which feels correct, and learning how to make the best use of the talents which were gifted to me at birth and those which have been passed along to me during life by family and friends. These seem like modest goals.

Having said all of the above, the following two provisos are most important to me in this journey:

1. I reserve the right to do whatever is necessary (within the law) to discover and live a life based on happiness, including living and dressing in a manner consistent with the gender role I assume; and
2. I reserve the right to change my mind at any time about any steps I might take in furtherance of paragraph 1. (sheesh ... you can take the boy out of the lawyer but ...)

(Oh yes, and I reserve the right to continue to tell bad jokes regardless of what I am wearing, which, when you come to think of it, may be the worst joke of all!)

And that's it. I truly want to thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for taking enough stock in our friendship to try and understand what I have attempted (poorly, no doubt) to say. If you think this letter was difficult to read, please remember it has taken me a lifetime to write! Ultimately I recognise that this is my issue to come to terms with, and I don't have the right to expect anything from you or anyone else. Rather, I simply hope for your continued friendship, if you are able and willing to give it (and if you aren't, I understand that too and will always remember you fondly as a friend of Richard) and for your support as (come to deal with one of 'life's little lessons'. Obviously, this is not a secret journey, so please feel free to share this note with whomever you feel would be best served. I will be happy to speak with you about any concerns you may have, and to answer any questions as best as I can.

Thank you for your time, for your patience, for your indulgence and for your support, and ultimately for your friendship, all of which has made it possible for me to get to this point with only a minimal amount of brain damage.

Robin

This sample letter is written by Jacob Hale, an F.T.M. who was working as an academic at a university in Los Angeles. I had the good fortune to meet Jacob (or as I called him, 'Kodiak Jake') when I was visiting friends in San Diego. Like most F.T.M.s he was absolutely masculine, a charming, witty companion and it was totally impossible to detect any female quality which he might once have known. His letter was mainly for the benefit of his working colleagues, academics and administrators of the university.

Jacob wrote that this went to all the faculty in his department and to the department secretaries, with copies to the dean, associate dean, and the M.T.F. colleague mentioned in the letter. A shorter, more formal letter went to the provost.

Dear Professor X:

I am writing to inform you that I am in the process of transitioning from female-to-male. I will begin teaching under my new name, 'Jacob Hale', at the beginning of Fall 1995. The legal change of my name and sex status, in accordance with the laws of the State of California, will occur between the end of Summer Session one and Fall 1995.

This transition is both deadly serious and extraordinarily joyous for me. I have been struggling with gender pain for as long as I can remember. Never had I felt the profound sense of peace which I felt that morning when I awoke knowing that I was on the verge of transitioning into manhood. Although I have had moments of worry and fear since that morning, these worries and fears have been about possible problems others might cause me. That feeling of peacefulness at my core has stayed with me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace with myself.

You will, no doubt, notice a number of physical and behavioural changes in me over the next few months.

Please be assured that I am entirely healthy and that these changes are necessary for my wellbeing. I realise that my transition will require some adjustments on your part, as well as on mine. For example, I am sure it will take a while for all of you to become accustomed to calling me 'Jacob' or 'Jake', and to using masculine pronouns to refer to me. I won't be a stickler about this but I do expect you to make an effort and, over time, to succeed. If you're more comfortable starting to call me 'Jacob' or 'Jake' now, that's fine; or, if you're more comfortable waiting until the start of Fall 1995, that's fine too. I anticipate that both names will be used for a while.

There is nothing confidential or secret, in any way whatsoever, about this information.

If you have any questions about this that I might be able to answer, I sincerely hope you will feel free to ask me. I feel quite comfortable talking about my transition, and would much prefer talking with you than having misconceptions exist due to lack of knowledge about transsexualism, particularly about female-to-male transsexualism. Two other people you may contact for more information are my therapist, and my friend who transitioned male-to-female as an Associate Professor California State, Northridge.

I have already spoken with Dean Jorge Garcia, Acting Associate Dean Donald Hall, and Professor Daniel Sedey, Chair of the Department of Philosophy, about how to ensure that my transition will cause the least disruption possible at work. All three have been extremely helpful and supportive, which I appreciate deeply. I will continue to work with them on this. If any of you have any suggestions about this, I would appreciate hearing them. However, I'm sure that my newly found sense of internal peace, my comfort with myself, cannot help but enable me to become an even more effective teacher, scholar, and participant in the California State, Northridge, community. I would have liked to have written individual letters to each of you, but clearly this is impractical. Still, please accept my apology for this somewhat mechanical form of communication, and please, as I said before, feel free to talk with me about this.

Sincerely,  
(girl-name deleted), Associate Professor

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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.