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Do Transsexuals have a Choice?

To Be Able to Choose is to Be Empowered in This World.

by Callan Williams 

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Not every choice is for something, we often choose against something.

I believe that we have no choice about being born with a predisposition to transgender, no choice to be transsexual or whatever other word you use to describe it, but we do choose what we want to do about it. The notion of choice, and of taking responsibility for that choice is crucial to our being able to become the best we can be in this world. To be able to choose is to be empowered in this world.

If we want to stop being victims, we must take responsibility for our choices, even those choices which are almost unfathomable to most in this heterosexist culture.

Many transsexuals argue that they have no choice but to have surgery, that they have no choice over the chain of events that leads them to surgery. For some, this fundamental tenet of faith is so strong that they feel if a person feels they have choice over S.R.S., they are not really a transsexual, for transsexuals

have no choice. This is a key part of their history, and many get distressed when anyone talks about the choices a transsexual person has to make in this world.

Where do choices end for transsexuals? They choose where they go for surgery. They choose when to have surgery. They choose how to pay for surgery. They choose to have a graft or not. They choose where to transition, choose how and what to tell their friends and family. They even choose what they wear to and from the hospital. People choose all these things, but many insist that they don't actually choose to gender shift and have surgery. You may wonder what they would have done if surgery was not an option, as it wasn't until about forty years ago. Life is about the cycle of death and rebirth, and we all choose to die in some way and be reborn, though the death of the physical body is the ultimate choice.

Rational Choices

I actually had one transsexual argue that no rational person would choose gender shift and surgery, so therefore it can't be a rational choice. Is it a rational choice for a cross-dresser to put on a dress and go to the mall? The rationality of decisions is very much about the way you view the options. This culture wants to convince us that no rational person would do either, and enforces that decision with stigma. Who would choose to take the pain that one has in telling their mother, their kids, their wife that they choose to change gender and/or sex, if even temporarily? Heterosexism requires the separation of men and women, and works hard to tell us that to cross that line is a horrible and bizarre thing. But it isn't, or at least that is the message of the transgender paradigm.

The difference seems to be as simple as the difference between "I had no other choice but to have surgery" and "I felt I had no other choice but to have surgery." The first statement denies any possibility of other choices, while the second affirms that we saw surgery as the right choice for us, whatever the drawbacks.

I do understand that many transsexual people who have chosen gender shift and surgery do feel they had no other choice, that they had exhausted their other options, but that is not unique to transsexuals. The ability to relinquish responsibility for our actions because we saw no other choice than to drink, leave, kill, (or any other action) opens up an excuse for all. This makes me very uncomfortable.

I believe that transsexual people who choose surgery make the best choice they can under the circumstances, but actually going through with gender shift and surgery has been made to seem so selfish and hare-brained that they choose to claim no choice in the matter. "I didn't want to do it! I had to! My nature forced me into it!"

Gender shift and surgery are fine and honourable choices, not selfish or hare-brained. They are often the best choice that we can make to get on with our lives. I applaud and admire their choice, as a transgendered and a transsexual person to bring their gender role and body into harmony.

Stigma and the Closet

If it was easier to make the choice to gender shift, we would not have so many transgender people twisted by the closet, torn apart by being impaled on the horns of the dilemma of which way to turn. We wouldn't have to wait until everything else in our life is gone before

we chose to walk through the wall of gender, and much of the pain of living with stigma would be lessened and we could get on with our lives and our contributions to the world.

But the model that says transsexualism is a disease, a birth defect, means it is something to run from and deny, not to be proud of. I know many cross-dressers who longed to be transsexual because that was explainable, took you out of the range of making a choice to change clothes. But today even many transsexuals reject that illness model.

James Green was talking to a big old shrink at an American Psychological Association convention. When he told the shrink that he was talking about transgender, transsexuality, the shrink replied "I don't think God makes mistakes". James simply answered, "Neither do I." We are not mistakes, just humans with special gifts and challenges, like any other human. We can choose to see our transgendered nature as a curse, or simply another way humans are born.

This is a big deal. Do we actually have choice over how we live our lives, even if we don't have choice over who we are? Are we slaves to the world, or do we control our destiny by the choices we make?

What is Choice?

Much of this discussion rides on how we define 'choice'. It is clear that our choices are based on both biological predisposition and a wide range of other environmental factors, and it is possible to argue that humans are merely victims of their genetic and cultural programming, and have no true choice. You can argue that humans are so limited by their history that free choice, free will is not an option, we are just meat puppets. But to make that argument is to take away our responsibility for change, for transformation. If we are only slaves to our past, then we have no personal responsibility or personal freedom. We become only a part of the collective, not individuals. Robert Schuller preaches on the fact that this century has been one of collectivism, of serving the machine, but the pendulum is swinging back in the next century to the individual. He reminds us of our individual responsibility and choice, "If it is to be, it is up to me!"

Transgendered people make individual choices. It is clear that well over 90 percent of people in this culture don't have massive discomfort at living in a standardised gender role. Transgender people don't ask for the ability to change the role of everyone, but the ability of individuals to define their own role, either crossing the sex/gender line permanently or exploring the turf around it. We don't choose for the culture as a whole, but we do claim the right to choose for ourselves, to not simply take what is issued at birth.

Not every choice is for something, we often choose against something. We choose not to be men, but does that mean we choose to be women? For some of us we do, but for others the choice is more complex. For many of us we choose not to choose, but to let the world push us where it will, yet does that mean that we haven't made a choice?

We always make the best choice we can even if we don't understand why we made the choice. Even when we make choices that appear self-destructive we are choosing to destroy something that is haunting us. We often choose to paint ourselves into a corner so that the only choice left is the one we want, or the one that we think we deserve and so we get it without seeming to make a choice. This is especially true of choices that carry such stigma as transgender and sexual orientation. We are so afraid of being shunned, isolated, separated for simply doing what will satisfy us that we try to abdicate the choice.

The Fear of Choice

Erica Jong notes that one reason people are so afraid of choice is because it seems so easy to make the wrong one. It's so easy, especially in a culture where choice is frowned on, one that socializes us to serve the machine, to become homogenized. People club us about our choices. "If you really loved me, you would never hurt me this way!" When our choices are not about hurting them but rather about finding what we need. We become gun-shy and afraid of losing love and connection, so we try to find ways to not be isolated, to not have to take the responsibility and the consequences of our choices. We need to believe we are lovable for who we are, not just because we choose to do what others want us to.

We also recognise that taking responsibility for our choices now means we always had responsibility for our choices and then we have to forgive ourselves our past transgressions, which is hard for anyone. Learning to love ourselves unconditionally, not just for what we did or didn't do but simply for what we are, is the basis of learning to love others that way.

More Choices Than Ever

As others have noted, the range of choice that is open to us is expanding geometrically. We have choices of communication, of travel, of medical treatments, of lives that were unknown just a few years ago and the possibilities that are just over the horizon are even more boggling. We are not living in a world that is getting more simple, but one that is getting vastly more complex, where the range of choice will allow any individual to become who they want to be.

The simple fact that we have so much more information available to us opens up our choices immensely. We now see options we would not have known existed before. To be prepared to handle this range, we have to start teaching kids to make intelligent choices, not merely to follow rote patterns. We can't simply crave going back to a simpler time. It isn't going to happen, and those simple times weren't really all that much fun because we were chastised, stigmatized, humiliated and declared criminal for the choices we made that seemed 'anti-social'. The drug problem is a good example. While some people tried to have kids 'just say no', those in recovery found that they couldn't kick until they took responsibility for their own choices, and trusted, rather than fought, the callings of their 'higher power'.

Society has an interest in making the choice to be transgender, or to live as a gay person, or lots of other choices, as difficult as possible. The easier the choice, the more people will take it, and that may be seen as a destabilizing force. If people thought they could choose to change without stigma, they would, and where would we be then? There are reasons that the hurdles for S.R.S. are so high,

reasons the gatekeepers fight so hard and that we become who they expect us to be in order to get what we want and what we need.

Taking Responsibility for Choices

I watched Martine Rothblatt confound an interviewer on local television. As the interviewer tried to get the 'no choice' phrase out of her, she simply said she had lived as a man and had always wanted to live as a woman, and her wife and kids thought it was okay, so she did. The interviewer looked stymied, not understanding how anyone would gender shift just because they chose to. Gender shift is so drastic, so irreversible, so weird, so isolating. Why would anyone choose to do this? But Martine knows that she made a choice for change. It was her time and her way. She was born transgendered, and she chose to gender shift.

We have no choice in the gender we are assigned by our parents, no choice in what they expect us to wear, to do. For them it is a simple process of only looking at what is between our legs, not what is in our hearts. Some children like red shirts, others blue ones. Do we look for a cause in these choices? Could we find one if we did? But when some children with penises prefer dresses and some children with vaginas prefer no dresses, we look for a cause. Why are these choices different? Because the world says they are, that's all.

The Pressure to Make the 'Right' Choice

I understand the enormous pressure that comes from growing up gender-queer, transgendered, or even transsexual in this culture. To know what is expected of you was somehow contrary to your nature. I understand that for many, the pressure is so intense that choosing surgery is the only choice they see for happiness and that many of us were in so much pain that they saw the choice between surgery and death as the only choice at all.

But taking responsibility for your choices in no way diminishes the pain and suffering you felt. In fact, taking responsibility confirms your ability to do something about your pain and suffering.

By choosing to gender shift, have S.R.S. or transgress gender in other ways, you cease to be a victim to the pressure the outside world puts on you to conform to gender standards. We are shaped by peer pressure whether we resist it or conform to it, but by choosing our own path we become not merely followers or reactionaries, but actively responsible for shaping our own life and future.

Choices and Power

Declaring the ability to choose the shape and direction of our life gives us the power to transcend our history, to become more than slaves to our predisposition and our environment. Our choices will be shaped by who we are and where we have been, but they will not be limited by that. I have a role that I wouldn't have chosen for myself given the stigmas of this culture, but somehow it feels like the absolutely right choice. This is the dilemma of humans.

Think of the people who moan: "I have no choice but to go to work because of the bills!" But you can reduce the bills, choose to live more simply, choose other work. You do have choices, even if some of them require you to do unpleasant things, to renounce something you want now in order to get something you want more later. When you choose to work for long-term happiness, you have stopped being a victim, and that means you are in control.

The point is that, whatever limits we have to free will, in the long run it is our choices, not the least of which is how we choose to see the world, that determines the ultimate direction of our life, and determines our ultimate happiness. It only takes a little bit of choice to make a big difference to any human life. We can transcend our history. We are humans.

If we want to stop being victims, we must take responsibility for our choices, even those choices which are almost unfathomable to most in this heterosexist culture. We must be able to satisfy ourselves, to become congruent and whole, even if some people think we are just plain nuts.

Even if we simply say "I didn't choose to kill myself and put an end to other's embarrassment with me, rather I chose to live in a way that I could be happy and effective," we need to take pride in our choices.

To paraphrase what JoAnn Roberts often reminds us, in the words of John Steakley, "You are what you choose to do when it counts." Once we have control of and responsibility for our own lives. And we don't simply give in to nature or the culture, then we can start to become full and complete individuals.

And to me, that choice is worth working very, very hard for.

Callan Williams

From Callan's website: 📧 Hi! I'm Callan. You might like to know a little about me to put all this text [on her website] in context. I'm not sure that's a good idea - I wrote all this text to put myself in context. It's the result of writing as a process of self discovery, making choices of words and though those choices, glimpsing the meaning which I hold.

If I had to tell you one thing before you read this stuff, it's that I'm funny. It's not just that I think I am funny, but co-workers and audiences who have seen me as one of the "drama queens" have shown they find me funny too. I'm not sure, though, that it's obvious to others when you can't hear my voice or see my face. "You know, if people could see you when you said these outrageous things, I don't think they would panic quite so easily", said one co-worker. People who know me hear my voice in these texts, but people who have never met me often find them a bit, well, dense, pompous and supercilious. I just smile and know that when people don't know a voice, they tend to



read in their own voice.

I'm not quite sure how to tell you to get through all this text [on her website]. It's not laid out in any nice linear fashion, like a hierarchical class, and I'm not sure it could be. It was around 1984 when I realized I was not a vector-head, thinking in lines, but a net-thinker, focused on nodes and connections. What delights me are connecting dots, stepping away from something, coming at it from a different angle, and seeing how it is connected to other things. This is one reason there are so many posts here which stand on their own, because they were written to take an active view of the subject being discussed rather than a reactive view.

I agree with Steven Covey when he writes "Freedom exists in the moment between stimulus and response". I believe we need to create conscious responses, not autonomic reactions, and that means questioning assumptions, unwiring old patterns and seeing things afresh.

I know material [on her website] will challenge your assumptions, things you accept as obvious. My goal, though, isn't to give final answers but to raise questions. I like the answers I have found so far, but even more I like seeing where my answers have flaws, where there is a truth, a narrative which questions my assumptions. Take me on an intellectual roller-coaster ride anytime - "Connections" with James Burke, anyone?

The other thing you can't see here is how queer I am. I may tend to tasteful suits from Rena Rowan, but even in a banker's suit, I am usually the queerest person in the room. My words and my dress may speak to quiet, conservative classicism, but my attitudes are about transformation, reinvention and questioning the status-quo, even when the status-quo is for individual freedom.

I believe in the role of the parent, in social order, in taking responsibility for an effective and healthy society which is a good place for kids to grow up. Freedom comes with cost, and the first cost is facing your own fears, doing your own healing, so you can interact with people from a centered place rather than from wounds and fears. We start dependent, then we claim independence in adolescence, and then as adults we have the obligation for inter-dependence, working together, making personal sacrifices for the good of the group when that is called for and standing boldly apart when that is called for.

There is text here [on her website]. It will challenge your thinking, it will reach out and comfort you, and not necessarily in equal parts. I don't know you, what you are interested in, so I can't make choices for you, but if you have any questions or comments, [drop me a line](#) .

I'm happy to have you here [on her website]. I hope you find something that makes you laugh or think or even cry on these pages, something that pushes a button inside of you and helps you understand how to take control of that response, helps point to healing a little bit.

As you read these pieces [on her website], you will catch a glimpse of me in the shadows behind the words. More than that, though, you will catch a glimpse of you from how you respond to the reflection of yourself you see in my words. You will see me not just I as I am, you will see me as you are.

My mission statement is something I heard Anne Bolin say at Southern Comfort 1993: "In societies where gender is rigidly bipolar, rituals of gender transgression remind us of our continuous common humanity".

If you find some places where you are reminded of where our continuous common humanity comes together, then I'm happy to have you visit.

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