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Being Male-to-Female Transsexual

Reflections on Australian Transsexual Services, Then and Now

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Article appeared in Polare magazine: October 2001 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015

In earlier years, I thought I had reached a lasting accommodation with being transsexual. In my middle years, I seem to have unfinished business. These are reflections on Australian transsexual services then and now. And, in passing, some lessons I have learnt that may serve others.

I always identified as female, and with women, and went as a female a great deal from about the age of fourteen. As one does, I offered nightly prayers I would be a girl by the time morning came. In the 1960's and 1970's, I saw a stream of doctors and psychologists in several Australian cities. I'd say I encountered little compassion or understanding during this period. Yet this was ten years after the late Johns Hopkins (Baltimore) program had put transsexuality on the map and into *Time* magazine.

Psychiatrists I saw were happy to dispense Ritalin, sodium amyltal and so on. They'd give you almost anything, in fact, except hormones. "But do you", breathed one earnest female psychologist, "really want to be penetrated?" Well, actually, no, it wasn't right on top of my list just then.

The lowlight of this period was a stay in a certain psychiatric hospital, which vetted people for assistance with sex reassignment. The magisterial Dr. 'B' who ran the show determined that I was probably schizoid, homosexual, and several other terms of abuse now mercifully erased. I chickened out.

Unexpectedly, the burden became more manageable around my twenty-ninth year. Dr. 'B' might say he did me a favour, bullying me. After all, have I not had a number of relatively settled years doing the male thing? Sure, there is some truth in this. After an appalling relationship that led to two children, I fell deeply in love with a brilliant woman and am still with her.

The caution is that it never goes away. Even in a good year, every day is one of rationalisations and fantasies about a parallel life proceeding elsewhere. As there is little rhyme or reason why it got easier in my twenties, I have no decent theories why it is harder now. Ageing, and changing hormonal balances, may be implicated.

Comparing transsexual services then and now, I would say there is more acceptance by sufferers and less ignorance from society around. The psychiatric profession, I hope, has moved on to tastier prey. The Gender Centre and a few other places are beacons that didn't exist years ago. Yet, for all that, services seem haphazard. I wonder if some people are not enduring some needless suffering.

The Christian right might be scandalised, but more inclusive and widespread education and information on this birth condition would probably be of great help to traumatised young people about the inevitability of some of them being gay.

Even in the U.S.A., where some 30 to 40,000 people are supposed to have changed sex, contemporary M.T.F. stories still report marriage and two kids as a routine prelude to transition. Some young transsexuals might have happier lives if they were able to make informed medical choices at puberty. That's not to mention the women they might marry.

The actual information on medical and other services for adult transsexuals, it seems to me, is disconnected and technically imprecise. Thank god that we have the web and its tireless American transsexual volunteers are there to supplement the tiny pool of Australian information.

People who almost by definition are stressed, and taking their lives in their hands, face a situation a little like Russian roulette. The complex of therapies that transitioning, or non-transitioning, transsexuals might need - doctors, drugs, therapists, surgeons, hair removal, speech therapists, and so on - is patchy in coverage and integration. Nobody seems to be very knowledgeable about the probable effects of combining various interventions.

Sometimes it seems the only way for transsexuals to find out what works is to use themselves as guinea pigs. It is surprising that more government or private clinics haven't tried to pull it all together in one-stop shops that offer secure and integrated pathways for transsexuals. Finally for those that decide to go that way, access to surgeries is restricted and (apparently) still linked to the scientifically unproven Harry Benjamin rules. It is hard not to imagine that latent Australian demand would exceed supply.

People who persistently express themselves as transsexual are just not inclined to be making it up, any more than women who report prolonged sexual abuse are hallucinating. When you talk to other M.T.F.s, you find that your 'unique' experience and expression are eerily similar to theirs, no matter how many years and miles separate you. The genetic bases of the condition are becoming clearer. And, yes, we are often left-handed.

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In my literature scans, I see little evidence for widespread regret of M.T.F. sex-change. Exceptions appear to include individuals who are (a) sociopathic or psychopathic (b) compulsive or fetishistic cross-dressers or (c) doing it for the sake of a lover. This is hardly surprising. Such individuals could get into trouble doing much less risky things than changing sex.

Australia is a kindly country when you compare it to some of the alternatives. Heaven knows why more Australian practitioners don't get on with it and offer therapies and surgeries on a more *laissez-faire* (Thai) model. It might be more socially useful and relieving of suffering than delving into the permutations of I.V.F. technology.

From my own wayward existence, I derive three lessons. The first is to be reconciled, the second is to keep fit, the third is don't be fooled by your own acting abilities.

Being reconciled: This just means that accepting the transsexual condition is innate and tangible. It does not control your options of what to do about it. It doesn't make you a worse person or, indeed, a better one. I think it's a trap to regard the position as some kind of cosmic blessing, as some writers will suggest. But I do see value in promoting the point that many M.T.F. people are decent and successful human beings, not freaks.

Keeping fit: It is more than a coincidence that I never experienced any piece of mind until I started to get fit for the first time, also in my late-twenties. Once again, physical fitness and mental discipline help me to cope now. Not to mention a lifetime devoted to literature and music. Religious expression does it for some transsexuals I know.

I believe transsexual people need a disciplined physical and mental balance as much as, if not more than, ordinary folks. It is very tempting to maltreat and malnourish a mind and body that don't match, but in my experience it isn't a helpful thing to do.

Don't be fooled: Some transsexuals will say that they are or were hopeless as males, but I've heard some almost brag about how well they do or did the male thing compared to the dull regular guys around them. Despite endless tears as a teenager, I think that latter. I fell into that kind of sinful pride myself.

I think often M.T.F.s put on a good act because they like women and women like them. They don't edit 50 percent of the population out of the dialogue and, if reconciled to their condition, need not suffer the useless stress of striving for 'masculinity'.

One should not be fooled by any of this. Being accepted and (superficially) integrated as a male doesn't necessarily mean you are one or that your basic nature will not be resurgent. This is yet another area of life where you can't always fight city hall.

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.

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