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Being Woman, Becoming Woman

Being a Woman Seems to Come so Easily and so Readily for Paula Now

by Paula Kaye

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Paula Kaye
photo courtesy:
Belinda Mason Photography 

My name is Paula Kaye. You may have seen me recently on Channel Nine's *Bodywork* series which featured the story of my sex reassignment

surgery. I grew up in Sydney in the 1950s. It was an unremarkable and essentially settled childhood. Except that from an early age I found that I was most comfortable with and most interested in being with girls. A part of my brain was telling me, "These are your kind, look and listen and learn." I guess I did – all my life. Being a woman seems to come so easily and so readily to me now, all these years later. Where did this walk come from, these gestures, these thoughts and feelings and passions?

I firmly believe that the greatest good any of us can do is to be ourselves and to be that self out in the world for everyone to see.

For me growing up with transsexualism was about orientation, not identity. I didn't think I was a girl. I knew I wasn't. I just wanted to be, every day. How

many nights did I pray, "Dear Jesus, let me wake up as a girl"?

My father was emotionally and often physically absent. I really don't think he wanted to be there. I was girl oriented before he took emotional flight though. I do believe there's a complex interaction between nature and nurture. I had both elements. I'm glad I did. I think if I'd had a father who tried to make me into a man I would have been dreadfully scarred with inner conflict.

My feminine-self came alive – with a tremendous outpouring – when I hit puberty. I desperately – and hopelessly - wanted to be a girl. I dressed in my mother's clothes whenever I could. I lived for those moments. I told no one.

And then it happened. The disaster that befalls all children with gender dysphoria. Puberty hit my body as well as my mind – in entirely the opposite way. I outgrew Mum's shoes and dresses. My body masculinised and the world became more hostile and alien.

I stayed firmly inside. All anyone saw was the mask. Incapable of authenticity or integrity or honesty or ambition or discipline, I failed to grow up. The invisible girl inside the hollow man-child.

The 1970s provided some release. You could be androgynous - even outright feminine – as long as you stayed inside the ghetto of peace and love and brown rice. In inner Sydney you could walk the streets in a circle skirt and strappy sandals. In the morning though you would have to go to work and, desperate for love and acceptance and safety, the mask would go back on.

I just didn't believe I could live as a woman; cope with the fear and the trauma and the rejection and the bashings. I was isolated in a world of hippie political correctness. I thought I was too tall, too unfeminine, too vulnerable, too scared. I imprisoned myself in a lonely tower of despair and threw away the key.

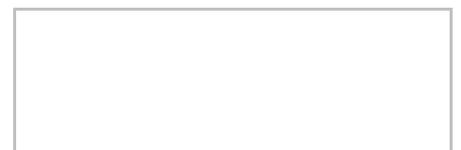
When it came to relationships I was the original serial monogamist. Never able to be myself I just couldn't make them work for long. In the end they'd give up on me. Too immature, too uncommitted, too evasive, too unauthentic. In the end they'd feel uncomfortable about the cross-dressing and the confessions.

By the 1980s I was in deep denial. I emerged from a particularly destructive relationship determined to fulfil a lifelong interest and I joined the Army Reserve.

I regard that decision as seminal – starting me on the road to becoming woman, becoming myself. The army forced to me to do things I didn't believe possible, challenged my concept of self.

I came out of those eight years with a vastly stronger sense of self-esteem, of self-discipline, of maturity and of plain old guts. I would find those qualities of critical importance when I came to transition some years later.

At about the same time I joined the Army I married for the second time. I did not tell her



about my condition. I thought this was the woman who would turn my life around. Only I could do that but her love and acceptance of the person I presented to her furthered my growth. I came to love her deeply.

Now I did face inner conflict. How can you love someone so much and not be honest about who you are. I came to feel like a volcano about to erupt.

After reaching an epiphany in which I saw clearly the woman I was, and realising that whatever others thought about me I had to be myself I told her. She was devastated, a broken woman. We struggled on for another six years – in denial and unspoken warfare, desperate not to lose the life and the love we had. The end, though, had to come. Distracted, and at the end of her tether, she found my skirts and shoes and banished me from the house. I never returned. We are now divorced and have no contact.

Determined to tread an open-ended path towards an authentic-self and an authentic life I began an open-minded exploration of my condition and my nature. I became a regular attendee at the Gender Centre. Eventually, I knew that I had to begin. I went to see the Counsellor.

From that moment my life has changed dramatically. Has it been frightening? Yes. Has it been hard? Yes. Has it been dark and lonely? Yes. Has it been joyous and wonderful? Yes, that too.

Oh! I did the usual things: read Andrea James, began the process of psychiatric evaluation, group sessions, Primogyn injections, electrolysis, electrolysis, electrolysis.

And then after what seemed an eternity but which was really only six months I transitioned at work which went very well thanks to Telstra's robust diversity policies and wonderful staff. From that moment on I have lived as the woman I always dreamed of as a child.

Two years after beginning treatment and eighteen months after full-time transition I finally had surgery and changed my birth certificate. Along the way I met an old friend from twenty years ago. We fell in love. Alex has now become my partner. He has made this journey with me over the last two years. His support and love have been incalculable.

I transitioned openly within my family, my workplace, my community. From my family I had an initial rejection which lasted two years but elsewhere I have been widely accepted.

Me, the woman who thought it was impossible! I am now reconciled with my mother and sister and my step-granddaughters and their mother.

How could this have taken fifty-two years? The only way I can make sense of it is to see my life as a larger journey of self-discovery and growth.

I had a long way to go before I acquired the honesty and courage and sense of self-worth I needed to be able to do what I have done.

And I have not done it alone. I am very aware that I have been the recipient of the most extraordinary support and acceptance from health care professionals, friends and workmates.

Unlike my former life, since beginning this journey I have been very open about who I am. This has been a journey towards being woman but more than that it has been a journey towards being me.

I don't have much to give except being myself. I seek to put that reality out there in the streets and the coffee shops and the workplace. Out there in the magazines and on public television. Me just being me. To show people that a transsexual woman is just a woman with transsexualism, really very ordinary, whose reality is certainly challenging but not threatening. If that reality is threatening at all, it is threatening to fear and ignorance and bigotry.

I firmly believe that the greatest good any of us can do is to be ourselves and to be that self out in the world for everyone to see. Then, just maybe then, that little girl hidden deep inside someone, somewhere won't have to wait fifty years before she comes out, grows up, becomes herself, becomes woman.



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Yes. Has it been joyous and
wonderful? Yes**

photo courtesy:
[Belinda Mason Photography](#)

Paula and Photographer Belinda Mason conceived the idea of a series of images that would challenge media stereotypes and popular misconceptions of transsexual women. These images and accompanying text can be viewed on [Photographer Belinda Mason's website](#) by selecting the options 'Exhibitions' and then 'Becoming Woman'. Many Thanks to Belinda for her permission to use these photographs.

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