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Laura's Day of Blood

A Reassignment Surgery of Her Own

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Laura Seabrook is a Neo-Pagan, a modern Gallae.

When I was about 6 or 7 years of age I went to a school sports carnival and got lost coming home. I waited at the wrong exit, and the public transport staff, taking pity on me, gave me a lift home. As it happened I got home at least an hour earlier than the rest of the school children. That night I had a peculiar dream:

I started my transition in 1994, and it has been a long path leading to it, full of twists and turns and full of surprises.

I dreamt that I was wandering lost in the night down a dirt road. I'm dressed as a schoolboy and carrying a bag full of textbooks. Then, a vanguard (my father owned one of those) drives by and stops. The door opens and a young woman wearing a pillbox hat offers me a lift. I get in, not knowing what else to do.

On the back seat are two enormous cats, one black and one spotted, which look at me with inquisitive eyes (and one licks me on the face). The woman tells me not to be afraid and comforts me, saying that everything will be okay. After a while we arrive at my parents' house. I thank her and leave the car, dressed as a schoolgirl.

It wasn't until a few years later that I started developing gender dysphoria, but the dream seemed to be a precursor of it. It wasn't until after I started my gender transition, and became pagan, that in the dream I'd met Cybele, Goddess of transgender persons.

Conventional wisdom would have it that transgendered and transsexual people are a recent phenomenon, particular to the twentieth century. Nothing could be further from the truth. There have been transgendered people in different cultures and in different times.

And some of us have been priests and priestesses. The Gallae, who followed Cybele and Attis, were such as this.

Cybele originated as an earth goddess worshipped in Asia Minor. Her cult spread originally to only Asia Minor and parts of Greece. During the Punic wars, Rome imported her cult in order to satisfy a prediction of victory that "if the Mother of Mount Ida is transferred from Pessinus to Rome, the foreign enemy that has invaded Italy, will be driven away and vanquished." That "Mother" was Cybele, and after the statue and the black meteorite that personified Cybele was transported to Rome, the war was won.

As an official Roman God, Cybele was synchronised with Rhea, "Mother of the Gods". She became primarily associated with the concerns of women, protection against one's enemies, the healing of grave illnesses (epilepsy was considered one of her "gifts"), guardianship of the dead, a granter of boons, retributions and a giver of the gift of prophecy.

Her cult had many followers, but of most interest to us are the Gallae, her transgendered followers. In ancient times a male initiate to the cult of Cybele would castrate themselves on the "day of Blood" and thereafter live as a Galla, dressing and behaving as a woman. Nor were the Gallae the only transgendered followers of Goddesses in those times. Hecate and others also had their transgendered priestesses. The nearest modern equivalent is the Hijra of India.

When referring to Gallae (I prefer to use the singular of Galla for masculine/feminine folk and Gallus for feminine/masculine folk. To understand just why the ancient Gallae persisted and sometimes prospered, you need to know about the Myth of Cybele and Attis.

The following is a modern re-telling of this by contemporary Gallae:

The Myth of Cybele and Attis

Zeus desired Cybele and made advances to her, which were rejected. One night Zeus approached her while she slept and masturbated at her feet. Later, because of this, Cybele gave birth to Agdistis, who was androgynous and immensely strong.

Because Agdistis was uncontrollable, Dionysus managed to trick him into emasculating himself. A great river of blood pours forth from Agdistis's wound and is absorbed by the earth from which spring forth all manner of flowers.

Nana sees the fruit and finding it beautiful, places it on her bosom. Cybele changes the fruit to a seed from which Nana becomes

pregnant. Nana's father, believing her to have been licentious, locks her away without food or water, attempting to starve her to death but Cybele supplies her with food and drink.

Upon the birth of the child her father orders it taken to the river and left among the reeds to die but shepherds find the child and take him home. The child is named Attis.

Attis grows into a remarkably beautiful young man, and Cybele, observing that the young lad is more beautiful than any of the gods, loves Attis above all others and showers him with gifts and favours. Attis, of course, returns her love. Agdistis also loved Attis and seduced the vulnerable young man.

Midas, king of Phrygia, arranges Attis to marry his own daughter. Cybele and Agdistis however disrupt the ceremony. Cybele informs him of the agony he caused her when he left with Agdistis. When Attis learns of Cybele's suffering, in a fit of passion he grabs a knife and under a pine tree emasculates himself.

As he lay dying he called out, "Oh Great Mother, forgive me. I never sought to cause you grief and I never will again". Violets spring up from drops of his blood, entwining into the boughs of the tree, and therein entered the spirit of Attis.

Upon seeing that her son was repentant, emasculated, and dead, Cybele carries the pine tree, with all its decorations, to her cave. For the three days Attis is dead and he visits the underworld. Then, on the third day, Cybele brings Attis back to life. Providing Attis with her most glorious raiment she proclaims the nascent one her daughter and her lover, conferring upon Attis gifts of mystery equal to her own. In her own words Cybele declares the transformation:

"Rejoice, my son is gone and in his place a daughter has arisen. Let all of beauty, strength, power, compassion, honour, mirth, and reverence be at her service. Let all who would do her harm, pay grievous penalty, and to all who do her tribute accrue fitting reward."

Now this may just seem like religious nonsense, but if we look at the elements in the myth, we can see attempts of androgyny, repression, denial and finally acceptance of transgendered identity.

It provided a framework in classical times under which the Gallae could exist as gender variant males. The Cult of Cybele was a mystery cult, so details were not all known to the general public.

Back in Greek and Roman times, the reception was just as mixed as it is now for transgendered people. The Gallae were loathed, shunned, and accepted at different periods. The last of the ancient order were massacred by Christian mobs in the last days of the empire.

I am a modern Gallae, an "adopted daughter" of Cybele, and I'm not the only one. There are other Gallae in America, the United Kingdom and elsewhere. We are few and far between, but here none the less.

So what does it mean to be a modern Gallae? With traditional sources wiped out, how is this relevant today, and how can one call oneself a Gallae?

To answer that I need to explain what being a neo-pagan means. There are many different types of neo-pagans. The broad category that I fall into is in following the duality of the Goddess and the God.

The Goddess represents supreme feminine principle of the universe. Reflecting the nature of human female bodies, she is shown in the cycles of growth and change in nature. The Great Goddess is the summation of all ways to be feminine, and is represented in individual goddesses as aspects - single or multiple parts of the whole.

Like the Goddess, The God represents a supreme principle, but a masculine one rather than a feminine one. Reflecting the history of societies and the nature of the male body, he is shown as a maker and breaker of rules, of authority and limits and a transcender of these. The God is both the son and the lover of the Goddess.

Now the Goddess represents the infinite, nature and cycles; the God represents the finite, humanity and our mortality - both are plural, collective, and not singular. A common version of the Goddess is of Maiden-Mother-Crone, reflecting different stages of traditional gender roles attributed to women.

Many Gods die and resurrect (Jesus is one) and this reflects also the notion of change and ego death, leading on to rebirth.

In ancient times it also reflected the cycle of the seasons and the sun, and in neo-paganism this is mirrored in the "sabbats" or festivals that take place eight times each year. I participate in these and other rituals with other pagans. As a neo-pagan I believe that the Goddess and the God don't just exist as separate abstract entities. Rather they exist in each of us, regardless of whether we are male or female.

Being transgendered under such a framework then is no great thing - how can it be if one has both masculinity and femininity within one? Cybele, being an aspect of the Goddess is a mother figure ever accepting of her transgendered child; Attis is an aspect of the God, resurrecting from ego death transformed as the person she needed to be.

I was born in the Year of the Rooster with the Sun in Leo (an ancient "indicator" of being gender variant). I had epilepsy as a child (a gift of Cybele?) and my name means "of the laurel", which some Gallae wore around their heads. When I went to University as a mature-age student, I read books that showed photos of statues of Cybele and recognised Her as the lady in my childhood dream.

I was experiencing a pagan appreciation and development of life at the time and it all fell together for me. It would probably be hard for me not to be a Galla!

This isn't an exercise in the obscure for me - I find that it gives me spiritual help in times of stress and confusion. And for me of course, it feels right. As the opening quote shows, religious transgendered persons are not an aberration - we've been around for a long time.

Apart from being pagan and finding strength in this following, I believe there are lessons that can be learnt from the ancient Gallae.

Lessons

First and foremost is a degree of honesty. While the ancient Gallae dressed as women, they did not hide their status as being transgendered. I try to be honest (but not obvious) about this. Being a transgendered woman for me is like being a middle-aged woman, or citizen of Australia - just a facet of who I am - not the whole.

Second is a degree of community. The ancient Gallae lived in communities. This is often impractical today and share housing can sometimes be a quick path to a nervous breakdown. Just because one is transgendered in some way, there is no guarantee that you have anything else in common, or will like someone else who is transgendered.

But community is not just about whom one likes or dislikes, it's about helping others, sharing information and encouraging people to develop themselves as you have done.

Third is recognising the importance of periods of transition and rites of passage. When Gallae were initiated, they would dance themselves into a frenzy and then castrate themselves on the Dies Sanguinis or "Day of Blood". This was not an isolated or private event though (which is why we have eyewitness reports about it). It was part of a greater framework and had context within that framework.

In modern times those frameworks are hard to see - what we have instead is (if we're lucky) a medical or social framework by which we take hormones, transition, and maybe have surgery.

While surgery (the modern counterpart to the ritual castration) is hardly the be-all or end-all of the matter, it is still a major physical event. After the day of blood came the Hilaria (Rejoicing) followed by the Requietio or Rest. How many of us have rejoiced at what might be an end-point to our transition, but also needed to rest and recover?

With a sense of community, we can help celebrate our successes on the path that we follow. It is not so much the destination that counts - after all sooner or later we all end up dead - it's what we do along the way. Celebrating the phases and points in our path helps us process the lessons that we learn, and move on to the next stage.

Lastly, but hardly least importantly, is the spiritual sense. Being a Gallae doesn't make one any "better" than anyone who isn't (just as being Catholic doesn't give one the high moral ground over someone who isn't) but hopefully it will help enrich your life in a spiritual way.

Spirituality is how we embrace and cope with the world on everyday terms. It's not about abstracts or metaphysics (that's religion) but about the core of one's being, and of honouring that core while being in the world.

This is why honesty is important. It became clear to me that the transgendered path by which I became Laura (which comes from my own core identity), by which I abandoned any pretence of being a man, and started interacting and living as a woman, had to be a spiritual one. The twists and turns of that path are different for everyone, though there is a common core that we can all appreciate.

If you deny the reality of this, if you are not honest to yourself about who you are, then how can you grow and learn in a fully positive way? Why trade one set of pretence for another? Being honest in this way is not always an easy path but then the quickest or shortest route to a destination is not always the most productive either. Some people might say that they just want to be "normal" and have everyday lives, in the gender that is right for them.

There's nothing wrong in this - we all have our dreams of happiness and ways of achieving it. However, what have you gained if you get the dream and deny the reality?

Dies Sanguinis

In late October of 2000 I should have my reassignment surgery, my own "Day of Blood". I'll be flying overseas for it (as a result of another dream featuring Cybele, where she told me to trust my intuition) and a friend will go with me. I will have "eaten of the drum" and "drunk of the cymbal" as they said back in Roman times.

Before I go I hope to have a ritual or two with some pagan friends. The need for me is important, to mark a rite-of-passage. I took my own time getting to this point, in order to be sure that it was right for me, and that I'd be in a stable environment before doing it.

I started my transition in 1994, and it has been a long path leading to it, full of twists and turns and full of surprises. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world, and after surgery life will go on. Being Gallae helps me to cope and to understand this.

And I hope that wherever your path takes you, may it be as interesting and rewarding as mine.

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[Cult of Cybele: The Lady of Didymous](#) 

[Gallae WebRing](#) 

Gallae is derivative of Latin for Cock or Rooster. Historically the Gallae were referred to as Galloi or Galli (plural), or Gallus (singular). This reflects I think how those archivists whose works have survived saw them - as deviant males and yes, the Romans also had the same slang meaning back then! However, this little red hen uses the feminine version of the title, reflecting current use for transgendered males.

I am much obliged to Annie Ogborn, an American born Hijra, in raising these issues. This article is the result of that inquiry.

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