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My Struggle with Identity

And My Coming-Out Letter to My Brother

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Marika Jackson

I have chosen the title of this piece very deliberately because for much of the earlier part of my life (up to age sixty-seven) my difficulty had been precisely that, no more, no less. It would have been wrong to describe my conflicted personality in those early years as "gender dysphoria".

My discomfort as a male was only part of the story. The truth was that I wished I had been born physically female ...

My unhappiness then would be better described as being "maleness dysphoria". From quite an early age, seven or eight years old, until well into my teens, I was acutely and painfully aware that my temperament and my interests were at odds with those of other boys around my age, including my younger brother and his many friends. We lived in a small, pre-fabricated house in post W.W.II Holland where my father was establishing an "import/export" business after being demobilised from the R.A.F. at the end of the war.

It was a semi-rural area with many opportunities for adventurous boys to amuse themselves, and I would sometimes join my brother and his friends to do just that. I much preferred, however, to hang out with the few girls of the neighbourhood. I found their games and their toys far more interesting than robust mayhem.

I was particularly fond of a couple of Jewish twins who lived a couple of streets away and their parents never made me feel awkward about being there so often.

I think the first time I became aware that my behaviour might be considered by others to be unnatural was when my grandfather, who used to send my brother and me a bundle of English boys' comics every two months or so, once accidentally included a comic called "Wendy".

I loved it, but when I suggested to my mother that she should ask him to send more of the same, she made it quite clear that that would not happen and then went on to suggest that I should spend less time with my girlfriends and try to join in with the boys more. It was probably as a result of that moment that the discomfort with my identity germinated in my psyche, the notion that it would be wonderful to be a girl.

I became very emotional throughout my early-teens and I would cry at the drop of a hat, much to the exasperation of my parents, especially my father who, in every macho way, was a "man's man".

My all-boys school was a disaster and my attendance was poor, so when I reached fifteen, my father cleverly persuaded me that a good move would be for me to join the R.A.F. as an engineering apprentice.

Although I didn't realise it at the time, he must have thought it would make a man out of me.

I fell for it! I went back to England and into the R.A.F. just before my sixteenth birthday and served for fourteen years, from 1957 to 1971.

To some extent my father was proved right. Although the first few months of training were nothing short of hell, I soon adapted to the military life and even found the academic part of the apprenticeship to be much easier than it clearly was for many of my comrades.

This boosted my self-confidence and what made things even better was the fact that there was no shortage of females, both on the base and in the local towns. I gained a reputation, when out on the town with the lads as being a bit of a "chick magnet", to use today's terminology. I had no difficulty approaching girls, chatting with them for a while, and then bringing them over to join my group.

Little did my pals know that all I wanted was to "hang out" and socialise with the girls, nothing more. When it came to going-home time and "making a move", I was invariably a disaster and the poor girl would be both disappointed and bewildered.

This was very much the pattern throughout my fourteen years of service. My first experiences of sexual intercourse were not until I was twenty-two and stationed on the island of Malta. Once with a prostitute and once with a local girl with a "reputation". By this time I was

spending much of my off-duty hours exploring the island on my own, not wishing to be drawn into the macho drinking binges that were the norm. I was at that time also becoming aware of invariably feeling uncomfortable and somehow threatened in male social situations.

I rented a place not far from the W.R.N. nurses quarters for a while and had a sexual relationship with one of them for about three months. It was wonderful but she finally broke it off because, as she put it, I was "just too gentle", although that was probably not what she really meant. Whatever, she was right.

On my return to England in 1965 I spent much of my leave time in "swinging" London, mostly with a girlfriend with flats in Streatham and Acton. She clearly enjoyed my company and seemed to understand me better than anyone previously. She introduced me to some very interesting people, including gays and especially "transsexuals". I was enthralled by their honesty and readiness to answer my many questions, but couldn't see myself ever having the courage to take such a step. They were just too extreme, but didn't seem to care. They seemed to enjoy being seen as "in your face" transsexuals rather than women. It shook me a little but, at the same time, it opened my mind.

In 1970 I met my soul mate Kathleen through friends. The mutual attraction was instant, and within five weeks we were married. This was Kate's second marriage and she had a daughter of four and a baby boy. We remain happily married to this day, although she is finding it very difficult to come to terms with my decision to transition.

In September 1971 I was discharged from the R.A.F. and entered Nottingham University on a four year Arts in Education course. During this time, our son Adrian was born. I graduated with high honours in 1975.

My degree course included human psychology, and it was there that, for the first time, I came across the kind of information that spoke of sexuality and gender in straight-forward terms. I now knew that I had a condition shared by many others and suddenly faced the truth.

My discomfort as a male was only part of the story. The truth was that I wished I had been born physically female, and, according to what I was reading it was possible, with hormones and surgery, to change a male body into one that would match a female psyche. This was very exciting, and I sought out as much information as was available at that time.

However, I was now happily married with a young family, so any thoughts along those lines were quickly suppressed and remained so for some years.

During that time, whenever these thoughts threatened to take over, I would push them aside. I was not about to contemplate anything that would threaten my family. These episodes would be followed by periods of deep depression.

These periods of depression would be explained as resulting from pressures of work. Important to mention here that my sexual relationship with Kate remained good throughout this period, despite my problems.

In January 1977, I had left Nottingham with my young family to emigrate to Tasmania. I was recruited by the Tasmanian Department of Education as arts consultant, a move none of us has ever regretted. We were all very happy and excited to be in our new home on the other side of the world and for some years I managed to keep my dreams under control.

My work was very challenging and I was receiving recognition for the effectiveness of my initiatives. However, as time went on the feelings of being trapped returned with increasing intensity and for a short period around the early 1990s I experimented with women's clothing, wigs, shoes and makeup.

Kate was working nights as a nurse and the children had all left home. I would take photographs of myself and I even went out cross-dressed on a couple of evenings. I really was quite convincing, but I always felt worse than ever afterwards.

It was all very sleazy, fake, not at all what I was seeking. I became so disgusted by this behaviour that I disposed of everything. The feeling of relief as it hit the tip was phenomenal.

It was now quite clear to me that, if I was ever to express myself freely, it would have to be as a woman and the only true and honest way to achieve this would be by submitting myself to gender reassignment. But, once again, there was my wife and the family which was now becoming quite extended and of which I was the respected head. How could I do something so selfish. It would surely be a terrible shock for them all. I was now feeling more trapped than ever. I spent hours on the Internet reading the stories of people who had taken these steps and the awful repercussions they suffered because of it. Sure, there were some whose wives had stood by them, but they were in the minority. And I'm a grandfather with eight grandchildren, all girls interestingly. How would they take it?

The more I looked into things the more hopeless the situation seemed and the more depressed I became. Finally I became so desperately down that I told Kate about my feelings and she was understandably quite devastated but told me to seek help. If I didn't, she suggested, I might "go and do something silly".

Since then; My G.P. referred me to Dr Marie O'Sullivan at the Sexual Health Centre of the Royal Hobart Hospital.

After a number of appointments, blood tests and an M.R.I. scan, I was started on a course of hormones in October 2007.

In July 2008, I wrote letters to all significant friends and family informing them of my decision to undergo gender reassignment. [See sample following]

With only a couple of exceptions, all have responded supportively. I have taken out a second credit card under a new name. Drivers' licence soon. My chosen new name is to be Marika Kaye Jackson.

I am dressing according to my honest tastes, which is not significantly different from what I was wearing as a man. Jeans, t-shirts, women's flat soled shoes, with a little tasteful "bling". Growing my hair longer. Studs in both pierced ears. Significant breast development and reduction of body hair. Feeling fantastic.

Kate has now accepted my course as inevitable, and although still unhappy, she has been enormously relieved to find that friends have not fallen away.

I'm working on my voice.

Electrolysis is too expensive right now, but when I can afford it ...

Marika's Coming-Out Letter to Her Brother

Dear David,

This is one of the most difficult letters I have ever had to write. I had to do it this way, however, so that, after you have carefully considered what I have to tell you, you'll have enough information on which to base a decision as to whether you could still be comfortable with me as your brother, and uncle to your children, or whether it may be better to cut me off.

Of course my sincerest hope is that our relationship can remain unchanged, but I'm realistic enough to face the possibility that the direction I have chosen may just be too confronting and hard for you to bear. Whatever your decision, I'm prepared and will understand.

I'm sure Dave that, over the years, it will not have escaped your notice that my interests and pursuits were invariably those of a more creative, intuitive, nurturing and largely uncompetitive frame of mind.

This mindset served me well as a life/partner, homemaker, parent, grandparent, artist and teacher. However, on the downside have been the ever present feelings of inadequacy as a man. However I might try, I could not be interested in most of what are generally regarded as male pursuits. On the occasions when I would participate out of necessity or for the sake of sociability, I would invariably feel uncomfortable and fall short of expectations, especially in competitive male situations involving beer, crude humour, "grunt sports", cars, guns etc. In social gatherings I will invariably interact with the women rather than the men.

I've had this conflict between my psyche and my physical self for as long as I can remember but thanks to the support I've had from my wonderful wife, Kate, I've been able to live with it. We've had, and continue to have, a wonderful partnership.

Recently however, my inner conflicts forced me to seek professional help because of severe bouts of depression. The upshot being that my problem turns out to be a medical condition known as Gender Dysphoria, possibly as a result of incomplete foetal development prior to birth. Although my physical sex is male, my gender (brain sex) is female. Put simply, a female psyche trapped in a male body. This is a condition that is more common than you might think.

As if my situation were not complicated enough, I have, for the last couple of years also experienced the complications of an enlarged prostate which, without treatment, had a high risk of turning cancerous with all that that implies. I was informed, however, that this risk could be greatly reduced with a hormone treatment that would, effectively, shrink the prostate to a size at which it would be unlikely to be any further threat but would also neuter me as a male and bring about some physically feminising changes. For me, the choice was clear.

A little while ago I started on a course of hormones as the first of a series of steps which, over time, will transform my physique to match my gender identity whilst also minimising the prospect of prostate cancer. During this difficult period I will not only be experiencing physical changes, but I'm also told to expect some emotional ups and downs. This will be an especially hard time for Kate. She has found it extremely difficult to accept and come to terms with my decision. She, understandably, feels hurt, betrayed and disappointed. She will need all the support that family and friends can offer her. My worst nightmare is that she may become socially isolated because of embarrassment or because friends have fallen away.

I realise that Kate's hurt and sense of betrayal may also be felt by you and your family. All I can say is that I'm really sorry.

Please understand, Dave, that this letter is not a pathetic plea for sympathy or support. Personally, I don't need either. In fact, I've never felt better about myself. I'm experiencing something that few others have, or ever will; the rare opportunity to be physically re-born.

Yes, I may look a little different but I'm still the same person you've always known, a person who asks for nothing more than acceptance from my family and friends. Please don't worry that, some day, I could turn up in Canada wearing a frock, heavy make-up and heels, a la "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert". Yes, there will be some changes in my manner of dress, but only to the extent of accommodating physical changes and avoiding any confusion about my gender.

I will also, at some point, need to adopt a female name. This again, will be necessary to avoid confusion. I'm open to suggestions.

Dave, I would also like you to know, that, in addition to your and my sides of the family, I'll be informing all of my friends. I really don't mind who knows about my situation. I have no feelings of embarrassment, shame or guilt. I just want to be open and honest with everyone. So, feel free to discuss things with your family or whoever.

Its been quite a challenge putting this letter together, and I'm sure it will have raised all sorts of questions in your mind. I'll be quite happy to answer these candidly and without embarrassment.

Finally, speaking as someone whose livelihood has largely been centred on their imagination, I just want to say that its ok to have a sense of humour about all of this. While I would prefer not to be the object of cruel jokes, the value of wit and humour in difficult circumstances can't be overestimated.

Love to you and yours,

Kevin

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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.