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Secret Women's Business

And the 'Art' of Dating Men

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Looking back and remembering how difficult things were during the months following my reassignment in early August 2010, I sometimes have to shake myself to establish whether my present life and circumstances are nothing more than a wonderful dream.

Isn't being a party to unabashed "secret women's business" something of an achievement? Call me deluded if you like, but I happen to think it is.

The euphoria then, "post-op.", soon gave way to feelings of loss; the loss of my home and family, the loss of my studio and the end of a potential future at the University of Tasmania, to name but a few. Furthermore, my flat, although comfortable and beautifully situated on the lower slopes of Hobart's Mount Wellington, did little to assuage my feelings of isolation, loneliness and occasional bouts of extreme melancholia.

So, when a former teaching colleague who'd moved from Tasmania to the N.S.W. Central Coast suggested I should consider doing the same, I took her advice and spent that Christmas with her. With her help I soon found a place that seemed acceptable and, importantly, I could afford to rent.

By mid January I had moved into my new Woy Woy home to await the arrival of my furniture and other personal effects. At first, the business of establishing a new home in a totally new environment was quite exciting and engaging.

Although it didn't take me long to connect with neighbours and the local community in general, it was only a short while before the realisation hit me that what I really needed was access to advice and some basic guidance from someone qualified to help me avoid the occasional social pitfalls that were constant reminders of my past.

For the sake of brevity, suffice it to say that, via my G.P. and subsequently my counsellor, I made contact with the N.S.W. Gender Centre some time around April/May 2011.

To those of you who've read some of my earlier articles, I realise the above may seem a little familiar. You're right, of course, but in the context of what I'm about to say it's important. So please read on.

During my association with the Centre, for almost two years now, there have been few occasions when I've missed a meeting, of either the Over 55s group or the Women's Group. Initially, my main interest was in learning from the diverse experiences and gender issues as related by others and how they compared to my own situation.

It didn't take me long to realise how lucky I've been in many respects. The stories of unemployment, homelessness, violence, social and familial rejection, poverty and prostitution for survival soon had me thinking that all of this, interesting and often heart-rending though it may be, was of no real relevance to my personal experience. However, I've kept on attending to this day because, over time, many of the "regulars" have become good friends. This to the extent that some of us will regularly get together at a home or a venue such as a club, cafe or some kind of public event like a fair or picnic.

In short, my continued attendance at the Centre meetings has been solely based on my friendships within the groups. Nothing at all to do with gender issues.

This caused me, at a recent gathering, to make the thoughtless suggestion, instantly regretted, that future meetings should have more of a social focus, rather than an emphasis always on gender issues.

The suggestion was met with stunned silence, followed by an animated reminder, from newer members, that their reason for being there was entirely centred around gender issues and a need to share and discuss them. They were right, of course. I'd lost sight of what the meetings at the Centre are, and should remain to be, about. How foolish of me.

Nevertheless, the reality is that, in terms of social progress, I have moved some way since January 2011. Nowadays, I have as many

good "mainstream" friends as I do friends with a transgendered background and, frankly, in terms of social progress, I learn a lot more from the former, especially the genetic women.

My female friends, many of whom have followed my progress with great interest, are never slow to quietly take me aside for a little advice concerning my deportment or attire, my voice or general demeanour, make-up, hairstyle and even "feminine hygiene"

I do expect that some of you, especially if you're still struggling with the conflicts associated with "coming-out" to yourselves, your family, friends and colleagues etc., will be aghast at such "superficial" concerns, but I make no apology for this.

Think about it ... Isn't being a party to unabashed "secret women's business" something of an achievement? Call me deluded if you like, but I happen to think it is. It's this kind of affirmation that's behind my earlier statement that my present life often seems like a wonderful dream compared to what it was only a couple of years ago.

It was, for a while, tempting to fall for the idea that, in terms of social security out and about, the companionship of "trans" sisters should be the focus of one's life. Safety in numbers, so to speak. I soon discovered that it's only true if it's understood by all involved that it only takes one inappropriately dressed or loud individual to attract unwelcome attention. I've always strenuously avoided such people.

Purely recreational cross-dressers, I feel, have a place elsewhere. This is not to ignore the fact that, prior to coming-out, such a venue may provide a safe environment for many genuinely transgendered people to briefly be themselves.

Unfortunately, I feel, it's this connection that can sometimes lead to unfortunate misunderstandings in the community at large ... But, anyway, I digress.

When I was with a small group of mostly women friends recently, conversation turned to the pitfalls to be avoided on the first date with a guy.

This was largely in amused response to someone's recounting of a disastrous encounter through a dating site. Although (after a couple of bottles) it was all very light-hearted, it turned out to be surprisingly enlightening.

I thought I might share some of the collective "wisdom" with you, albeit in somewhat condensed and less colourful language. First meeting/date with a guy:

- Present with stylishly, un-provocative, femininity. (Unless you're after "a bit of rough").
- Discreet make-up only. This also applies to perfume.
- Allow him to hold doors or chairs for you, responding with an appreciative smile.
- Allow him, initially, to lead the conversation. Be impressed. Smile sweetly. Don't be tempted to counter his stories of success with your own. This is very male behaviour, and a dead giveaway.
- Give him a taste of your intelligence by your questions or humorous asides only. Laugh at any jokes only if you genuinely find them funny. If you don't, a quizzically raised eyebrow works wonders.
- Wait for him to demonstrate his genuine interest in you before volunteering anything personal. If he doesn't, things are not looking good in terms of a possible relationship.
- Avoid giving away too much at first, especially things you sense could be a problem. Concentrate on allowing your personality and sense of humour to shine through.
- At a restaurant, allow him to suggest wine or menu items, especially if it's a place he knows. Choose modestly and be mindful not to finish your meal before he does. Allow him to pick up the bill if you're comfortable with that.
- If things go "pear-shaped" and you can see it's all a bit of a disappointment, don't extend the misery for any longer than necessary. Apologise sweetly and make your excuses. On no account leave your phone number.
- If, on the other hand, all goes well ... good luck!

As some of you will know, as an ageing "fem" lesbian, my interest in encounters with men (especially old ones!) is limited, so much of the above is irrelevant to me personally. Should the right "boy" come into my life one day, however, who knows? And by the way, If you're a relatively young person, bear in mind that the above advice comes from women of a "certain age". Would you consult your mother before such an encounter? I wonder?

During the early years after coming-out to family and concerned friends I was frequently cautioned to "be careful" when out and about on my own, especially at night. This was often in terms of horror stories they'd read or heard about. It was nice to know they cared but they needn't have worried. I've always been physically quite able to defend myself and, besides, this was at the time when issues of gender variance were increasingly the subject of sensitive treatment in the popular press and visual media. Gender variance was losing it's mystery and any kind of stereotyping was regarded as "politically incorrect".

Consequently, with the passing of time, we are less likely to be regarded as deserving of prurient attention or, worse, ridicule. I'm not ignoring the fact that these things still happen occasionally and caution is always advisable but I think I'm right in observing that in recent years things have improved and continue to do so. It's certainly been so in my experience. But then, maybe I've just been lucky. I still receive warnings from my friends from time to time about my risk-taking ways.

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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.