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Transition with Pride

To be Jessica, to be seen as Jessica, heard as Jessica, known as Jessica, was a feeling beyond description

by Jessica Merritt

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My name is Jessica Merritt. I am a transgendered woman, out and proud, and wanted to take the time to talk about my workplace transition in the hope that my own experiences will assist others in their own journeys.

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This is not a 'how to' transition guide, I have written a separate article covering the logistics and legalities, which is also available. Rather it is a series of personal insights about transitioning that I wanted to share and to, hopefully, provide a sense of optimism for others like myself.

This document is, in its entirety, a rewrite. When I first transitioned I felt an incredible sense of pride and, dare I say it, self-importance, and a pressing need to shout it from the rooftops.

"I am here! I am trans! I am proud!"

I was filled with elation, a sense of self-affirmation, that anything was possible. Then, when given the opportunity to tell my story, something strange happened. Within a few lines I had

descended into a deep well of self-pity and negativity. Tales of woe, of a tortured adolescence, of repression and abuse, poured out and I became physically ill writing about it.

It was almost as if some part of my inner-workings almost revelled in some perverse form of martyrdom, and demanded that these old wounds be revealed to the world.

In some ways, it is, of course, incredibly important that there be open dialogue about the very real suffering and discrimination trans people face on a daily basis. And I think, in a way, I used this as a justification for this act of literary self-flagellation.

Upon re-reading what I had written, picking at the fresh scabs on some of these old wounds, and having realised that while in a way I felt I was helping to educate others to the turmoil that accompanies a transition, I was instead secretly taking a masochistic pleasure in revisiting my own past conflict. And, upon reflection, I think this sort of self-indulgence can be incredibly disempowering and downright unhealthy.

Far too many stories that I have read online have been terrible tales of sadness and suffering, discrimination and prejudice, and systemic and flagrant abuse of basic human rights. I would on occasion deliberately delve as deeply as possible to find these stories, to read about these injustices, and for a long time the inequality and sheer 'unfairness' of it all threatened to overwhelm me. Undoubtedly, dwelling on the worst possible scenarios and outcomes retarded my own personal growth, and to a certain extent continues to inhibit my progress, as my therapist can no doubt attest.

After this reflection, I decided to come back and start a new article. Instead of treading out the same story we have all heard dozens of times, about my childhood, religion, parents, assaults, discrimination, rejection, suicide attempts; familiar themes to many members of the trans and L.G.B.T.I.Q. communities in general, I decided to focus on the positives, of the optimism I have dared to feel about the present and, more importantly, the future.

I also wanted to be bold enough to suggest that, at least in my own experience, the views of the mainstream community have also evolved, almost without our noticing. This was readily apparent to me during my transition. After years, decades, of self-destructive behaviour, after I reached the level where a decision had to be made, I was terrified. I discussed these fears with my few friends, how I knew I would be hated and rejected for what I truly was, how I would spend the rest of my life alone, a reject, a 'freak'.

And while it would be unrealistic to say it was a fairytale story, a 'Cinderella-like' emergence, it was certainly significantly more positive and rewarding than I ever envisaged in my darker moments. The first hurdle, confiding in my employers, was the hardest. I took a couple of practice runs with the people I trusted the most at work and was overwhelmed by the results.

The first responses were positive, supportive, and even glad. It was almost amusing, in retrospect, how dramatic I must have seemed ... "I have to tell you something ..." you could see their faces suddenly twitch, their eyes narrow, anticipating the worst. Then ... "I am a transgendered woman" relief, their eyes widen, a mixture of surprise and genuine warmth. Hugs, laughs follow ... one said "I am so relieved. I thought you were going to tell me something awful had happened!"

I nervously showed them pictures, told them stories, saw their acceptance, and felt myself flooded, for the first time, with genuine happiness and confidence. It was possible, it was going to happen. and it was going to be okay. Armed with this confidence, I made the leap to tell my manager. This was, by far, the most difficult discussion of them all.

This was a man I had admired for years, whose acceptance and respect I craved above all others, whom I had somewhat unfairly placed on a pedestal, and as such my mind was crowded with all sorts of fears and uncertainties, how it would play out, what would he say, what if he was repulsed, what if he couldn't handle it, or worse, what if he already somehow knew and was praying I wouldn't bring it up?

None of the above. I could tell from his face that acceptance and relief came in equal measure. It was as if, at long last, he could understand why I was such a moody, depressed and difficult individual who deliberately sought isolation from everyone, trapping myself in a dark place. It was incredibly liberating to be uttering those truths about myself. I felt like a huge, crushing weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

More meetings followed, emails, face-to-face discussions, phone calls. My company, from my direct manager to H.R., to senior management, were all appropriately supportive and positive, and at no stage did I face any negativity. The only real issue, and it wasn't a negative, was that they had not managed many of these transitions (as in, hardly any) and as such it was new for all of us.

What helped me tremendously was preparing, on the basis of the advice I received online, a formal 'transition plan', including a background of gender dysphoria, my current situation, some proposed timelines and some additional medical information. This was well received by my employer, and was of great value in expediting the process (which only took four weeks!). I had, by March 2014, been on H.R.T. and in therapy for six months, and everyone involved agreed I was more than ready to take the final leap, and so. on March 31, I did. My team were mostly supportive, or at least accepting, and it was, incredibly suddenly, all happening.

The whole process felt like a whirlwind. Sometimes I felt out of control, as if everyone had taken hold of my life and was directing it, deciding it, and it was a struggle at times to stay in control of the process. I would vacillate between panic and relief, almost hourly, and it was incredibly difficult to stay as a 'man', while I impatiently awaited D-day.

One constant theme, however, was, as I mentioned earlier, the immense relief I felt that a massive weight had been lifted off me. There was a certain liberation in stripping away the defensive layers I had built up over the years, of being able to stand up and yell "I am here!"

To be Jessica, to be seen as Jessica, heard as Jessica, known as Jessica, was a feeling beyond description. Even in my darkest moments, when other issues would bear down on me, I had the satisfaction of knowing I had done it. I had come out and survived, and was living and working as a woman.

I was not prepared for how accepting my peers would be. Additionally, something else happened.

People started coming to me in private, confiding their own hidden issues and fears, people whom I had considered friends and others whom I had barely spoken to. Even former adversaries came forward, expressing regret at previous falling-outs, and expressing respect for my courage in coming out.

It is worth noting that a lot of people, even the well-meaning ones, do not fully comprehend the the issues trans people face on a daily basis. This [excellend article in the Advocate](#)  covers this topic very well.

They can be supportive, and friendly, and even accept you in public, but there is still some way to go before there is the necessary deeper of the 'T' in L.G.B.T.I.Q. This does not mean, however, that you should discount their efforts, and you should definitely at all times value their friendship and support, and recognise their benevolence, even if they sometimes stumble with their pronouns.

It is also important to remember that transitioning is not a magic elixir that cures all your ills. Depression and anxiety, self-doubt and despair are constant companions to transgendered people of all parts of the spectrum, even post-transition. Not many days go by where I don't, at least briefly, question myself, and become very afraid for what might happen to me. Trans people can suffer from the same broad spectrum of mental issues that the mainstream community faces, and transitioning doesn't magically make them all go away.

What it did do, however, was remove a giant black stain from my very soul, a tarnishing of my inner self that had become intolerable. I had spent forty years living an identity that was false, one that was forced on me from birth against my will, and one that I was bullied and coerced into maintaining by my family, environment and social circumstances. And now, finally, I was free.

With that freedom, the healing can begin.

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