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A Letter to My Sister

Letting Her Know What Life is Like for Me

by Didi

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This is a letter I sent to one of my sisters. I have four, and a brother, and all have been accepting and supportive of my decision to transition in various ways and degrees. I thought this particular letter might be interesting to others, because it is an attempt to answer some questions my sister had, beyond her being 'accepting'. It is an attempt to let her know a bit what 'being a transsexual' actually is like for me.

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Sister: It's been a week since I wrote, we have been out of town and life has been generally crazy. I do have a lot of questions. If you don't want to answer just say so. My questions are how I can understand. I think I understand the simplified version of how things are happening medically.

Are there any risks as in dangerous side-effects to you? I hope not.

Didi: Sure, but most of them are avoidable. Some of them are risks involved with any major surgery, others are risks specific to this. I won't go into them, but the only thing one can really do to avoid them are to choose a good surgeon, and to make sure one is healthy.

Sister: Now for the hard stuff. I know from the things you have said in the past you are or were very much in love with Shrubs. She is obviously in love with you. This is where my confusion lies. This is not meant to sound silly, or to minimise your feelings. If the people you are with and around love you and accept you as you are why do you have to physically change?

Didi: Because basically the problem is not about being loved.

Being a transsexual means that one's (my) identity, my sense of self, is as one thing, (female). It's not an idea or a desire, it is part of that very grounded, solid, concrete 'knowing oneself'. It's been that way since I was a kid, and doesn't go away. Current medical theory is that the brain, which differentiates sexually between six and nine weeks after conception, differentiates one way, and the body the other. But it certainly seems to be something that seems 'hardwired' into a person. There's no documented case of that sense of self or identity changing.

At the same time, the body denies what identity says. It denies it to other people, and to me every time I look in the mirror, or look at my body. And on some level, the body represents external reality or just reality.

So, internally, a transsexual feels alien in their body. Not necessarily hating it, though that happens for some, but definitely alien in some way to it. A transsexual may also (frequently does) feel as if their own deepest sense of who and what they are can't be trusted, because it is obviously (materially) wrong. So there is also an alienation from that part of self that knows ourselves. But rejecting any faith in the sense of self doesn't give one a more accurate image, it simply is a rejection. The sense of self continues to say "this is who you are". This is absolutely who you are. The body, and every bit of intentional, social, subconscious and unconscious response from others, continues to deny what the identity says is unquestionably true.

It is simply an intolerable situation, or rather a situation most transsexuals struggle to adjust to, to tolerate, and do tolerate for various lengths of time. It usually means that a lot gets locked away, and unexpressed, because no-one is prepared to believe or can understand.

Most people live life with no conflict between gender identity and their sex. It is internally taken for granted. We're talking about gender here on the basic level, not the social level. We're talking about gender here on the level that lets us look at the short-haired person in a hard-hat and singlet, with bulging arm muscles working on an oil rig, with five o'clock shadow and a masculine demeanour, and lets us still say "That's a very butch looking woman! Probably a lesbian".

And of course we respond to them as female, even a homophobe responding with hate responds to the person as female. And the

woman is likely to see herself as very masculine or butch or even have self-doubts and think she is in some way not a real woman and yet on the basic level, never question that she is, in fact, some kind of a woman. This is the level of gender where the responses and cues and treatment are physical responses to body and smell and so on.

On the most basic level, it isn't a social thing. It is my relationship to my own body. I want my sense of self and my body congruent. But I've found it also is social in many respects.

Jeanne, it's not as if I haven't expressed myself in my life. I've generally been seen as effeminate, eccentric, having a strong feminine side, and inevitably that's been taken to mean I'm a queer, faggot, homo, etc.

That's okay, I'm bisexual, have been so openly since my early-teens, and generally prefer to be around gay and lesbian people, and felt a bit threatened by and definitely 'other than' straight men. But there is something about not having such a basic thing as one's sex (of identity) recognised, having it denied, that doesn't work. And being seen as having a strong feminine side is not the same as being seen as female.

Part of the result of that is that, while lots of things get expressed, in other areas having one's needs met or even speaking or thinking about that, makes no sense if something as basic as sex cannot be seen. And it is difficult to want to talk about or say anything about it, because people take it as a comment or a feeling, rather than a real thing. He feels like a woman (sometimes) is not the same as recognising that a person's core identity is as female.

By the way, Shrubs did know that I identify as female and it meant as little to her as it usually does to anyone, until I said I have to do something about this. The pain of that basic disbelief/incomprehension from others is one reason not to speak about it.

It is a state of walking around and feeling invisible, like I can't be seen. Interacting with others, it is as if one has a huge secret, the key to one's life and action, but it is a secret that can't be shared or spoken, because it can't be heard or understood. One of the great joys of my decision is finding a feeling of visibility. Another is a sense that nothing important about me is withheld in interactions.

On a very deep level, it is about the relation between me and my body, rather than about others' responses, though those response are, I've come to find, very important in terms of validating or denying one's sense of self. I have my sense of self denied by my body. I need some level of congruence. I've tried adjusting to reality for forty-five years, until I can't really go on living that sort of life. I need to adjust reality a bit.

Anyway, that's basically what being a transsexual is. It may result in a decision for having hormones and surgery, but a person is a transsexual generally all their life, even when trying hard to adjust. And of course in some senses, I'll never be female, but will be a close enough approximation that I'll get instinctively treated that way, and will feel enough congruence between my body and identity that I'll be able to get on with things.

Sister: If the sex and closeness is great with a female why do you have to change physically? If you told me you wanted men and wanted to be female to enjoy them I understand that. I just don't understand why, if you're accepted as the person you are in a male body but perceiving yourself as female, it matters.

Didi: Hopefully I've explained some of that. Basically, people can't really accept that I'm female, if I'm in a male body. Basically I have a hard time with that level of incongruity.

I will say though, that while changing sex does change a person in various ways, it doesn't particularly change one's sexual orientation. I like men, and have done so, and had sex with men, since my early-teens. That's not an issue, and having a male body doesn't change that. I've also always liked women sexually.

Obviously, it will be different relating to both sexes as female rather than male, but it doesn't change the physical level of attraction. While I'm attracted to men, I have enough issues about their behaviour and enough past history that my preference is far and away towards women, particularly for relationships. I don't expect that to change, and if anything its stronger, given male responses to transsexuals.

I won't say it doesn't affect my relationship with Shrubs. It does, in various complex ways, but we're working on it.

Sister: My questions sound confused as I write them. They also sound like I am not trying to understand the difficulty I know you had in making the decision. That is not the case. It is simply what I keep coming back to when I think about everything. I think many people are more male or female and it doesn't matter which body they are in. So why do you have to make such a radical change if you were happy with your relationships?

Didi: I think this is where cisgendered people just can't understand transgendered ones. As I said above, for cisgendered people sex is taken for granted, regardless of doubts about sexuality, or about social-expectations and being a real woman or real man. There is never a conflict at that basic level about what sex one actually is. The idea that it doesn't matter which body comes from that perspective. It has the perspective that one's sex is taken for granted and body and identity is congruent as a male (or female) and that changing sex is a change to a taken for granted sex and a (new) congruence between body and identity. There is no concept of a conflicted state between sex and identity.

There is also no real understanding of how different being one sex or another might be, on that basic sub-social level. Cisgendered people, with taken for granted sexual identities, see themselves as basically being themselves, and imagine being a different sex would simply be being themselves in a different body.

I think there's little awareness of how the self changes with sex, as well as a fundamental misunderstanding based on not knowing what

it is like to have a non-congruence between sex and identity. I think if you, for example, changed sex and became male, your sense of your own sexual (gender) identity would not actually change, and you would find yourself experiencing what a transsexual does, rather than what a man does, or what you would have if you were born a cisgendered man.

Where does Shrubs fit into everything?

We love each other ... and, it is nearly as big a thing, and requires as many changes of sense of self for her as it does for me. We're hoping to stay partners, and will certainly always be loving friends.

Sister: Guess I need to understand better what you are feeling and why the physical change is so important. Why is it better for you to make the change? This is hard for me to understand because despite what you felt like and/or acted like you seemed happy with yourself and the relationships you had. I don't think you ever held back emotions or tried to fool people. You were always you. Is changing sexes going to make things easier? I hope these questions make sense.

Didi: I've tried to explain as best I can. The questions make sense, and please feel free to ask more. I do feel I expressed myself, and was honest about my feelings, and of course a lot of people had problems with that. That's fine, rejection by others says as much about them as about me, and however a person is, some people will like it, and some won't. At least being honest, the people who like a person like me will be the ones who like me.

At the same time, as I tried to explain, people just don't get the idea of actually having an identity as one sex, when the body is another. So I didn't try, especially because it gets confused with throwaway lines like (from a man) "I feel like a lesbian in a man's body". I've rarely heard that from anyone who gives any sense of actually feeling like that may mean they need to have their body rearranged to stop the inner pain. As a result, I have to say that there are lots of areas where I simply couldn't be myself. I could have been a 'man in a dress', but the women I identify with don't really wear dresses much, and it's not about clothes for me.

Sister: I am happy and I love you a lot. I am sorry you were in such turmoil for so long and I am glad your choice is making things right. I guess my trouble was that I saw you as wonderful person and didn't bother to consider the inner you or that you were battling demands within. I didn't think there could be trouble if the outward appearance seemed fine. I just chalked up your 'differences' as being a rebel and I loved the person you were. That was why I didn't understand the need to change physically.

Didi: I don't know ... I think I am/was a wonderful person. I think the inner struggle helped make me that person. I think even my focus on saving the world and trying to make it a better place was given so much energy because it was a way I could be, relatively unaffected by gender. But I'm glad I put that effort in, and I love people and the world, and think they should be saved.

Likewise, I think who I am resulted in learning to be myself, and rebel. I learned that no matter who I am, some people won't like it. I figured out that being myself, a lot less people may like it, but those who do, will like it and be my friends, because of who I am, not in spite of it.

And while gender is very central, it isn't the only thing. Who I am takes gender for granted, but that very taken for granted-ness means that we basically don't think about it. I am a person who likes nature, and is fairly adventurous, intelligent, independent, sexual, sensual, tolerant in some ways, has good and bad habits and qualities, likes green, gets politically involved, is interested in ethics and spiritual things, likes motorcycles, has a certain approach to child raising ... I am those things whether I'm male or female, though the way those things are seen differ, depending on how I'm seen (and how I see myself as seen). I still like the same things in people, the same issues still nark me. I just have more freedom to do things as myself, though in some areas doing them are more difficult (socially) as a woman.

I mean, part of who I've been is someone who decided not to dwell on things that made me feel bad, and who enjoys all the wonderful things in life. That attitude helped me get through, in spite of gender dysphoria, and it still helps me get through. My delight in jumping in the waves, or seeing a movie or having dinner with someone I like/love, or in dancing or walking in wild areas or in a sunset was and is real. My desire to explain (or object and discuss ideas and structures of thought) is the same, still part of me.

So, the outward appearance of being just fine was a real reflection of everything that is (and was) just fine, in my life. Of course, the part that was sometimes moody, sometimes responded a bit weirdly, and the periodic depressions were just part of me too. They, and my inability to really ask for big chunks of what I emotionally needed, were simply the visible tip of the dysphoric iceberg.

Anyone with a major psychological problem, whether it be because of abuse, being adopted and not knowing their real parents, dysphoria, or something else, also has a life, where they might be high-achievers and seem extremely competent, balanced, creative, interesting and complex people. Dealing with that problem usually doesn't detract from who they are.

Transsexuality just seems more extreme because people do attach such significance to gender in who a person is. It is more extreme in that it requires other people to do a major shift in their perceptions, and isn't just an internal process (though real change and growth is rarely just internal). It's just that the only real way of dealing with dysphoria is to change the sexual characteristics of the body, and the social attribution of gender. And that does make one a different person, because of the way people see differently men and women doing same thing (a double standard).

And also, one lives in a different world because of that, and so has different things to respond to. (A woman in jeans, t-shirt and denim vest riding a motorcycle is seen differently than a man doing the same thing, and gets different reactions and resistances.) As well, hormones do have a real effect on our feelings and body.

Different hormones have different effects. So while I'm still much the same person inside in many respects, I'm not. I'm the same person in an entirely different inner and outer circumstance.

Anyway, I wanted to finish this set of thoughts. It's good for me to explain, because it gives me frameworks for thinking about it, and making it clear.

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