

Thursday, May 10, 2018

Party like there is no tomorrow!

My friend Emma recently posted in the TgR forums an observation about the transient nature of the transgender lifestyle.

So are we the last of the Trannies? I suspect so. I suspect we will go the same way as the Masons, the Night Soil Man, the Anti-Larrikin Squad, and Bob Santamaria's Point Of View. Society moved passed all of them and it will move past us as well. Is that a bad thing? No, of course it isn't. Society evolves - that is exactly what it has been doing since we either crawled from the primeval slime or stole that forbidden fruit. It is healthy and it is right.

Emma and I are from the old school - and sadly are just plain getting old.

The new school doesn't need all the social infrastructure that we developed last century.

And so those structures are crumbling around us. Over the last 10 years it has been like watching Limbo City collapsing in Inception.

Of course I have my theories. And as they are as good as the next woman's I might share them.

Before the 1970's if you had any desire to dress you kept it to yourself.

Going out in public was a high risk strategy; telling anyone was suicidal.

The result? A lot of very a lot screwed-up Transgender people who probably didn't even realise they were trans.

How many of the loonies in Mental Asylums were in fact suppressed cross dressers? We will never know.

This means that anyone born before, let's say, the mid-60's has suffered to a greater or lesser degree from their gender being suppressed. Although we may like to deny it, the baby boomers and older, carry mental scars. We suppressed our gender for so long and most importantly during our adolescence when we were trying to 'find ourselves'.

Although it became more common to dress and go out in the 1980's the need for secrecy was still paramount. Life in public was tough; you frequently copped abuse or worse. And so the community developed social structures where it was safe to come out of your shell. Secret crossdressing societies flourished, balls and private restaurant nights popped up in most capital cities, and we started sharing information on Bulletin Boards and then the web. Life in our shells, and out in the public eye was so stressful we had to release the tension by having fun - in little bursts, once or twice a month. Life was great - as long as you didn't take yourself too seriously. We didn't realise it at the time - but what were were seeking was closer to therapy than real life. And for many of us, the therapy worked.

Meanwhile a new generation was appearing. A generation which had not experienced the mental persecution of the last century. Society moved away from a position of hostility towards the gender diverse, and without the need for safe spaces and therapy, the youngsters just kept pushing the boundaries of social acceptance. Change in the last 10 years has been so fast it is undermining the very assumptions (dress code, secrecy, relationships) that used to define our "Tranny" life.

The baby boomers had to make a choice. We either moved with the times, or stayed in our comfortable but crumbling structures.

The movers threw away the secrecy, told the world, and participated openly in society; after all, the youngsters said they had a right to be there. And as more of the community was seen the attitude of society changed faster.

The stayers found that they were all getting older, their numbers were dropping because of natural attrition, and life just wasn't fun like it used to be. Soon the East Wing had to be locked and left to decay, then the West Wing, and now they are thinking of locking the front door and down-sizing. It is getting harder and harder to find the therapy - and paradoxically easier and easier to get the drugs!

I was lucky - helped by a bit of not-so-gentle nudging out of Seahorse I was forced to move. I really miss the old "Tranny" life - but I now have a completely different therapy - near universal acceptance in public.

As Emma observed, the writing has been on the wall for anyone who cares to read it. Sadly if you aren't in a position to jump into the big bad world without your armour on, then there is little you can do. But as they proved on the Titanic - you can have a lot of fun dancing to the band whilst the ship goes down.

Let your hair down girls and party like there is no tomorrow!

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 13:30

Monday, January 1. 2018

India on my own terms - the experiences of a trans traveller

Experiences of a transgender traveller in India

I recently returned from 3 weeks exploring Central India with my partner. This was an adventure for us on many levels, but personally this was the first time I had freely expressed my gender identity whilst on holiday. Before heading off from Sydney I looked on the internet for hints about what I might expect as a trans traveler but there wasn't a lot written. So I'm posting this account to help other trans travellers to enjoy India.

On reflection our trip was enhanced by my decision to travel on my own terms. At no stage did we ever feel threatened, and we were met with nothing but smiles. Indian women and girls were happy to approach us, and Indian men treated us with respect (and some amusement).

Wherever we went we were the subject of constant good natured attention. We will never know how much this was a result of my being trans, or because we were fair skinned, or because ladies don't travel on their own in rural India. But if you are a wallflower, avoiding attention and hoping to blend in, then this experience is not for you.

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English is not widely spoken outside the tourist centres, so our verbal interactions with Indians were quite limited. Waiters and hotel staff have learned to address foreign couples as Sir and Madam, and I was addressed in both ways quite randomly.

There was something surreal about dressing for dinner in a Kurti, Dhoti pants and a scarf and being addressed as Sir. If you easily take offence at being misgendered (even by someone not speaking in their mother tongue) then again, this experience is not for you.

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But for those trans women who want to travel somewhere safe and welcoming, India in my experience is a perfect destination.

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Travel Notes

Where you go, and how, may influence your experiences as a trans traveller in India; so here is some background on our trip. We flew to Jaipur from Australia picking up a car and driver on arrival. Our itinerary didn't include any of the big cities (where women are I believe more Westernised in dress), nor did we visit any of the big sights (where inbound tourists are commonly encountered and ignored). We stayed in reasonable hotels, ate extensively in local restaurants, and tried completely unsuccessfully to blend in.

Security Screening

At some point if you are flying into and out of India you will have to pass through airport security. In India all screening is performed with separate channels for men and women. The difference is that women are frisked behind a curtain (and the queue is much shorter). I never received any questioning about lining up in the women's channel, but frequently was called out when I queued with men. It's nice to be validated in this way - but you need to think through how you are dressed, what your travel documents say, and how you want to be treated in advance; then just queue with confidence.

What to wear

To be accepted as a woman in India you must dress as a woman. This means leaving short sleeved tops, short skirts and summer dresses at home. Women are expected to cover themselves completely in public. Although Indians freely expose their midriff and backs a Westerner trying the same look would just appear silly. For the same reason don't try wearing a sari if you have fair skin. I bought a number of Indian kurtis (tunics) online before the trip - coupled with loose pants these were comfortable in the heat. Most clothing sold in India is too small for a trans woman, and getting items made to measure is cheap but difficult if you intend to be travelling around frequently.

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Toilets

Public toilets are always an issue for the trans traveller. In India public toilets are generally so dirty (and smelly) you would have to be desperate to use them. We had no issues using the toilets in cafes and restaurants. You have to be prepared for there to be no toilet paper, and in the nicer places there will often be a lady cleaner. She isn't the gender police - just give her a small coin and a smile.

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Hijra

Indians are very used to the concept of a third gender - Hijra (trans) women can be seen in many temples. But trans Westerners are a rarity, they look very different so Indians don't seem to readily make the connection. I was asked once (by a boy in a temple) if I was man or woman and when I answered "both" he walked away without any obvious confusion. In one hotel the manager wanted to know why I presented as a woman, but when told I was trans he was completely accepting.

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As you can see I only had positive experiences of travelling in India on my own terms. It won't be long before we plan another visit.

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Sunday, January 29. 2017

Sex Science Self

A friend lent me this book to read over the New Year,

Sex Science Self by Bob Ostertag

A Social History of Estrogen, Testosterone and Identity

I will confess to coming to this book with somewhat conventional views on Sex Hormones and a healthy skepticism about the wisdom of endocrinologists and doctors. The well written book served to both reshape my beliefs about HRT and re-enforce my distrust of "medical opinion".

I strongly recommend that anyone considering HRT read the book with an open mind. Many of issues the book covers are quite disturbing and thought provoking. But I came away feeling better informed about the choices we make. After describing in some detail the history of "sex hormones" Bob Ostertag then reflects on our contemporary search for transgender identity. The following extract from the final chapter summarises the challenges we all need to confront.

From Page 163:

My point is not whether to take drugs or not, but to be aware that the bargain we enter into when we do is a very large and complex one, and knowing this history will help understanding all the implications of the bargain.

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Anyone who is considering taking estrogen or testosterone should know that the major clinical studies of both long-term estrogen use (which was huge, one of the biggest clinical trials in history) and long-term testosterone use (which was tiny) were suspended when the side effects of the drugs was deemed so harmful that continuing the trial to conclusion was judged unethical.

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Anyone who is considering taking estrogen or testosterone to either transition their gender (transgender) or amplify their gender, or reclaim their gender (aging people) should know that the idea that testosterone is the chemical essence of maleness and estrogen the chemical essence of femaleness comes from research done in the earliest days of endocrinology, which was thoroughly debunked nearly a hundred years ago but has lived on through massive advertising campaigns run by the most powerful pharmaceutical companies.

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Anyone who feels entirely confident of the set of beliefs and medical practices that have recently become the medical standard for transgender care should at least be aware that these same chemical substances have been at the centre of previous beliefs and medical practices that had spectacular ascents fueled at least in part by the demands of potential patients who fervently believed these new practices were medical necessities which they required in the most urgent way. These beliefs and practices then crashed and burned in an equally spectacular way, often with the same population who formally viewed them as medical necessity later viewing them as harm inflicted on them at great cost.

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Anyone who advocates for health insurance coverage for gender "transitioning" should at least be aware of the acute tension and bitter disagreement over whether transgender people are "sick". Think it through. Are you arguing that transgender people are sick in the same way that someone fighting to get coverage for a kidney transplant is sick? If yes, then do you consider homosexuals to be sick? If not, can you articulate why the L. G. and B. are not sick yet the T. are?

Conversely if you don't want to argue that transgender people are sick but you still want to advocate for coverage of transgender care can you articulate why? Have you thought through the implications of the idea that there are people who are somehow "less than sick" yet should still have the medical procedures they want covered.

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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 08:10

Tuesday, November 15, 2016

Vale ad eventum

Goodbye to the event?

For many years the TgR website has carried a list of events being organised for the transgender community. Occasionally I review the list and purge a few old entries but recently there is rarely anything new to replace them. So the list on the website steadily shrinks, to the point that I think it is worthy of comment.

Now I don't want to paint a picture that things were better in times past - they weren't. But it is a fact that a few years ago there were plenty of happenings open to anyone who wanted to attend; there were formal events in many capital cities, regular cafe and restaurant nights, and even occasional group social outings. Now there appears to be next to nothing. It appears that events-for-all within the transgender community, whilst not extinct, are definitely a threatened species.

Does this matter? Or is it just a natural evolution as society's acceptance and understanding of gender diversity matures?

Perhaps as the public event list shrinks we have lost the opportunity to appreciate the value we are missing. Looking back at my own life I recognise that those public events gave me an easy opportunity to come-out and helped me to find good friends and companions.

Let's look at those two values in more detail:

Public events gave people an easy opportunity to come-out.

My first tentative steps in public were with Seahorse NSW and I remain grateful for the opportunity to socialise that Seahorse provided through the meetings and events it organised. But in 2016 it really shouldn't be necessary to pay to join a restricted membership club when all you want to do is start socialising in your preferred gender identity. To someone who is just coming out, open events such as balls, restaurant evenings and coffee nights are valuable. They provide an opportunity to turn up and take those scary first public steps in friendly and supportive company. I hear stories of people staying on their own in hotels, venturing out frightened of attracting the wrong attention, and snatching a quick meal or drink on their own. There is no shortage of people coming out but where is the help and encouragement we should be offering them?

Public events helped us to widen our circle of friends and to find companions on our journey.

The diversity of the transgender community is both a weakness and a strength. A weakness because we can so easily fall into the trap of judging, disagreeing with, and criticising others who are 'different' and a strength because somewhere out there we can always find someone who shares our challenges with their gender identity. Many of us look to find "like souls" in the crowd as companions for our journey and from time to time we all seem to need to talk to someone who understands us. Although every month new faces go public about their gender diversity how can you identify and develop friendship with those who share your journey? Meeting new faces in the flesh is, I believe, the only way to form lasting and meaningful friendships, and that is what public events offered. What are we doing instead to help people find their place in our community?

Some have suggested that the recent decline can be attributed to the ease with which one can organise a social life through Facebook. Which leads me to speculate the Catch 22 of a Facebook social life. If you don't have friends on Facebook who share your needs then you won't get invited to any of their social events. But if you don't get invited to events then you won't meet any more people and grow your circle of trusted friends.

There are fewer and fewer people prepared to organise public events, because in all honesty it is hard work for the benefit of others. The organiser of an informal event suggests what they want to do and runs it past their friends to see if they want to join in. In contrast, the organiser of a public event has to make choices that will appeal to the wider diverse group, choices that may well not be what the organiser would personally prefer to do. The price to be paid for organising for others is you can't be sure of getting getting the food you like, or the music you want, or the company you enjoy.

And that I think is the crux of the issue. Public events are primarily organised to help others. And may be we are all too busy thinking of ourselves nowadays to notice that others need what we don't. Altruism sadly seems to be in short supply when it comes to organising our social lives,

Blog Export: Sensuous in Satin, <http://adrian.tgr.net.au/blog/>

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 08:00

Monday, June 27, 2016

Another 5 years pass in the life of 'Transgender'

This is post for those who might share my interest in words and the evolution of the English language. It seems strange that just 5 years ago we were discussing the death (or otherwise) of the 'Transgender' umbrella. http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/the_death_of_transgender.php
Now barely a day goes by without someone in the media using the term transgender as an elegant alternative to cross dresser/transsexual/gender queer/ or any one of the myriad sub-categories we have created and associate with so territorial

Transgender is the collective description of choice like it or not, and we aren't going to stop the transgender media bandwagon and change its wheels any time soon. So perhaps it is appropriate to reflect on its use (or misuse) and ensure it doesn't die of abuse. Because abuse is out there - and some of it seems to come from us! Collectively we are transgender, just as others are gay, lesbian, heterosexual. So my guiding thought is that grammatically transgender is destined to evolve to be like gay or lesbian. This evolution is not currently supported by the dictionary. The Google definition of lesbian identifies it as a noun and adjective::

lesbian
noun: lesbian; plural noun: lesbians
a homosexual woman.

adjective: lesbian
relating to homosexual women or to homosexuality in women.

But the currently transgender is only described it as an adjective.

transgender
adjective: transgender; adjective: transgendered

denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender.

I'm guessing no one has an issue any more with transgender the adjective. We are all transgender - that is why we are here!

But what about transgendered' - are we all transgendered? Other than being grammatically incorrect (you can only add -ed to verbs - we don't talk about Elton John being gayed) it implies that transgender is something you can do to someone - so they become transgendered.

Most transgender people I know have felt a gender incongruity for as long as they remember, and evolving science says we were probably born feeling like this. The only thing that changed along the way has been our awareness that there are others like us. We didn't decide to be transgender - and so there is no transgendering process that can be applied to us.

The GLAAD transgender media reference guide www.glaad.org/reference/transgender classifies transgendered as problematic; recommending that transgender be used instead. I went through the forums editing many uses of transgendered and replacing them with transgender - and guess what, it didn't make any difference to the meaning!

Although it hasn't made its way into the dictionary we know terminology does evolve in everyday usage. So can we use transgender as a noun?

In the singular I think the answer is no. Why would we say "I am a transgender" when you don't hear people say "I'm a gay". It is more common to hear "I'm gay" or "He is a gay man". So let's follow suit with "I am a transgender woman" or

"I'm transgender" and give "Being a transgender" a miss.

Things are less clear cut however with the plural noun, transgenders. The GLAAD media guide recommends saying 'The parade included many transgender people' rather than 'The parade included many transgenders' - which seems sound advice.

But we freely talk about 'same-sex marriage as a right for gays', and 'the bigotry shown towards gays and lesbians'. So perhaps there is a strong case to also talk about transgenders in the same way, saying 'He urged transgenders to make their voices heard'. This use of a plural noun is also borne out by recent posts in our forums:

Transgenders fare better in India where homosexuality is still illegal

Eddie Redmayne seemed to empathise closely with transgenders and the transgender cause

an article in the NY Times about transgenders who transition late in life

In summary transgender is a widely adopted way of describing the gender diverse - it is here to stay!

We are all transgender and fight for the rights of other transgenders.
And although I'm transgender, I'm not a transgender, nor am I transgendered.

Let's see what the next 5 years brings to the lifecycle of the word transgender.

Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 16:48

Thursday, February 4, 2016

The Danish Girl - review

The Danish Girl is billed as a true love story, which may be good marketing as the cinema was nearly full when I saw the film. But it would be more accurate to say that the plot is loosely based on the life story of one of the first transsexuals to attempt sex reassignment surgery. And rather than documenting the blossoming of love between two people it explores how that love is challenged and eventually destroyed by the relentless drive of a transsexual to become a woman.

The film starts with two artists (Einar and Gerda) in a happy loving relationship and finishes with the happiness of Einar in her new body as Lili. Though the Danish Girl is set in the mid-1920's it speaks to contemporary issues that many of us have faced in reconciling our relationships with the need to express our gender. Because the drama of the plot is so immediate to us you may find the film deeply moving - I certainly did.

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I approached the film expecting to find annoying mistakes in Eddie Redmayne's portrayal of a transsexual - I hardly expect a cis-gendered actor to get it right. So I found it disarming that Einar's struggle with his femininity was so convincing that it was like seeing snapshots of my life, and in the character of Lili I frequently had flash-backs of familiar faces from our community.

The film touched on so many aspects of a transgender life, good and not so healthy. Frequently it was in the small details where I saw a reflection of my own experiences.

It showed the irresistible drive to express our femininity - often catching loved ones by surprise, the way we study other women and so modify our behaviours, our naivety in assuming that we are fooling others with our femininity, and the impatience to complete our journey evidenced by overdosing on hormones.

The Danish Girl paints the medical profession in a very poor light. It was painful to watch the inappropriate treatments they came up with for the transsexual condition. Although it shows how far we have come in the last 100 years, it highlights behaviours that you can still observe in contemporary practice. How many more years will we have to wait?

A film just following the journey of Einar into Lili would have provided a good insight into the transgender struggle for anyone interested. But the Danish Girl is about not one, but two Danish girls.

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Gerda's reactions to finding her husband transsexual will probably speak powerfully to most cinema audiences. Alicia Vikander as Gerda gives a convincing portrayal of the emotional roller coaster ride we so often give our partners. Although, she comes across as the injured party, losing a husband and his love, her unwavering support to the end is a very positive message to send to the audience.

I can unreservedly recommend that everyone should see the Danish Girl. It can be an emotional experience so take a hankie.

I expect it will be a seminal movie in promoting a wider understanding of the transgender experience. The Danish Girl is billed as a true love story, which may be good marketing as the cinema was nearly full when I saw the film. But it would be more accurate to say that the plot is loosely based on the life story of one of the first transsexuals to attempt sex reassignment surgery.

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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 08:03

Thursday, January 14, 2016

Do we need voice training?

On a couple of occasions well meaning acquaintances have let me know that I should "work on my voice". Although I try to avoid shouting (hard in a noisy club) I've been reluctant to talk in what I see as an affected way. My journey is one of becoming "me" and so changing "me" to suit the cultural sensitivities of others doesn't seem genuine.

The urge to change ourselves to fit more comfortably into cultural norms of male and female is something we all experience to a greater or lesser degree. Is the need to "blend in" driven by a insecurity and a lack of confidence, or is it the other way round? Does the presentation of a more conforming binary image lead to improved confidence? Probably a bit of both.

If I'm going to be brutally honest, on reflection, many of the obsessions of contemporary transgender life look a lot less like "expressing your true gender" and more like "acting out a culturally accepted role".

I started my journey crossdressing convinced that all I was doing was acting - the wig, the nails, the heavy makeup, the deliberately female costume. Acting is fine for an occasional evening out, but if expressing your self becomes a part of your life then acting isn't the way to go.

If your gender expression actually causes embarrassment and distress to others then perhaps there is a strong case to change your image. Voice training in such circumstances is probably a valuable exercise. But it shouldn't just be one of the tick boxes on the transgender journey - something you do because you think it will make you a better, more genuine, person.

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If your gender expression actually causes embarrassment and distress to others then perhaps there is a strong case to change your image. Voice training in such circumstances is probably a valuable exercise. But it shouldn't just be one of the tick boxes on the transgender journey - something you do because you think it will make you a better, more genuine, person.

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 20:37

Wednesday, August 26, 2015

Varieties of Love and Lust

My thoughts for this post came from a paper written by Dr Brian Knutson, professor of neuroscience and psychology at Stanford University. <http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~knutson/ans/ansch12.pdf>

In the paper Brian Knutson proposes a biochemical basis behind sexuality and gender. It's a hard read but Brian gets close to what I presume we all want to read when he says:

Animal research has indicated that the male and female poles of brain sexuality reflect extremes of a gradient that allows for many intermediate types

Brian then goes on to assert that at least 4 sexes exist in the world - man within man, woman within woman, man's mind within the body of a woman, and a woman's mind within the body of a man. He claims the details for this have been worked out in lower animals, suggesting that similar principles also operate in humans.

BUT Brian is still a long way from suggesting a scientific basis for the common assertion by trans women that they have a female brain trapped in a male body.

The focus of Brian's work is lust and sexuality - and the variations he has mapped out talk only to sexual preferences.

Various forms of homosexuality and bisexuality are promoted if "errors" occur in the various control points of these biological processes

So there is a hint of an explanation of sexual diversity. But I didn't find any clues to what might cause gender variance as widely experienced in the transgender community. The vast majority of transgender people I have met over the years do not express a feminine gender in order to facilitate having sex with males. A few do, but the evidence of the majority indicates that there is more at play than just lust and reproductive sexuality.

If further research confirms that there is a change to the brain that results in a feeling of male or female gender (as opposed to male or female sexuality) then we must also be wary of assuming that those with a feminine gender identity must have a feminine gender brain.

There is an early (and woefully inadequate) study of transexual brains that concluded exactly the opposite. Although male and female brains can be distinguished, the tested trans women were found to have male brains. The study details are here:

cercor.oxfordjournals.org/content/21/11/2525.full.pdf+html

"The present study does not support the dogma that male-to-female transsexuals have atypical sex dimorphism in the brain but confirms the previously reported sex differences in structural volumes, gray, and white matter fractions,"

If you subscribe to the view that there is a masculine and feminine brain (and everything in between) then Dr Brian Knutson's neuroanatomical observations on small furry animals may provide a possible explanation. As the animals can't talk, the observations were on their sexual behaviour (p230) which he then suggests may apply in humans. This leads the article (through references to homosexuality) to suggest mismatches of femininised brains with masculinised bodies leads to sexual variety. Or in Brian's words (p232)

The fact that male and female brains have distinct but related psychosocial properties allows sexual urges to become quite complicated in the real world

Studies on homosexual and hetero sexual males have suggested that there is a difference in their brains (Savic et al. 2005; Berglund et al. 2006; Savic and Lindstrom 2008). Brian Knutson would I expect embrace this as confirming his views that variation in sexual attraction can be traced to changes in brain development.

But nothing in all this explains how two very feminine women can be attracted to each other in a lesbian relationship

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(with feminine brains they should be attracted to men). Nor does it model the lack of correlation between attributes that Knutson suggests as feminine (nurturing and social motivation) and expressed sexual preference (love and lust). The arguments for feminine and male brains whilst encouraging us to accept sexual variety as normal, barely scratch the surface in explaining why we exhibit (and presumably feel) different degrees of femininity. I subscribe to the view that sexual variance (as embraced in the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual community) is distinct from the gender variance we all experience. If gender and sexual variance are distinct and independent then it is unlikely that one simple mechanism will account for both. The dimensions of gender seem designed to defeat any model based on a linear progression of brain types.

But in the absence of any better explanation of gender you can of course believe what you want. You can build your understanding of yourself around a concept of "unconscious sex" as proposed by Julia Serano. And because it is unconscious you can't be expected to know anything about it - let alone explain it to anyone else!

If however your gender faith looks for scientific proof - then be aware that brain sex research is riddled with more holes than Swiss Cheese.

Love and lust can be far more enjoyable if you don't have to analyse it!

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Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 19:32

Wednesday, July 15, 2015

The Rocky Road to Acceptance

I've tried to put acceptance into some sort of context because it isn't very well understood. The better we understand it the more chance there is of some positive outcomes for the Trans community. This post illustrates how the attitudes of society might evolve over time.

We start at the beginning of our journey to acceptance with ignorance.

Ignorance

What you don't know can't hurt you!

Ignorance, and its undistinguished partner, denial, is our starting point. If you are not aware that something exists then you have nothing to accept, and no reason to learn about it. If we look back over any contemporary issue such as gay rights, immigration, or the use of asbestos we find a time when sections of society were just not aware that the issue existed. And often those who had heard about the issue would deny it affected them.

Ignorance: We don't have any homosexuals around here. We are honest country folk who value the traditions of marriage and family life.

The journey of educating society about gender diversity has to move people from ignorance by creating awareness.
Awareness

In our contemporary society awareness is nurtured through stories on the internet, in print media, and on television. In this way someone can become aware of gender diversity by viewing trans themed stories in the media. We can also become aware by being personally directly exposed to an issue for instance by personally encountering a gender non-conforming person by the freezer cabinet in Woolworths, or knowing someone who comes out. Finally we can become aware of facts by absorbing information from documentaries and serious commentary. Knowledge about something can develop into understanding. When someone is touched by the seeds of awareness they will become aware of other examples of gender diversity around them. We have all experienced a heightened awareness of a particular model of car that occurs after we have purchased one ourselves. Although awareness certainly leads to more awareness, it would be a mistake to assume that this automatically leads to acceptance. There is a long journey from becoming aware of more men walking down the street holding hands, to accepting that gay marriage is justified.

Awareness: Everywhere you look nowadays you see men holding hands and kissing in public. It is becoming a serious health issue.

Our journey to the acceptance of gender diversity starts with awareness, and the recent publicity about transgender stories has sown the seeds. But what might grow out from this new found awareness? I'd like to suggest three possible outcomes: Rejection, Tolerance and Acceptance.

Rejection If there is no compulsion or desire to embrace a negative or uncomfortable situation, then awareness will often lead to rejection. Rejection can also be the result of bigotry, a hardening of preconceived attitudes often re-enforced by religion and other belief structures.

Rejection: I believe we ought to be ... tightening up the laws, making them a little more draconian, and maybe we would influence a few of them to take the plane north where it has been decriminalised. Do not let them sully our state with their evil activities. (George Brookes 1991)

Tolerance

According to Wikipedia, Toleration is the practice of deliberately putting up with, allowing or permitting something of which one disapproves. Toleration includes behaviours that we might sometimes describe as conditional or begrudging acceptance. The motivation to tolerate something may stem from an underlying sense of fairness, a desire to avoid change, or perhaps a feeling that the issue is not important. In a relationship one partner may tolerate the other's

behaviour, but this carries with it no approval or support. That which is tolerated is often the subject of criticism and insults. The road to positive acceptance is littered with attempts to force others to change their attitudes; by blackmail, by coercion, or worst of all by legislation. The outcome is frequently little better than a begrudging acceptance, and at worse total rejection.

I think it's wrong, I think it's abnormal, but I don't mistreat anyone who engages in it. I accept that it's out there and that some people are doing it. In short, I put up with it even though I think it's not really right.

Acceptance

Acceptance goes significantly beyond just tolerating something. Acceptance is a conscious assent to the reality of a situation and recognises something (often a negative or uncomfortable situation) without attempting to change it, or stop it happening. At its best, such behaviour is unconditional and freely offered.

There is a subtle difference between tolerance and acceptance. It's the distance between moving into the cul-de-sac and having your next door neighbour trust you to keep an eye on her preschool daughter for a few minutes while she runs out to the post office. It's the chasm between being invited to a colleague's wedding with your same-sex partner and being able to slow-dance without the other guests whispering. (Jodi Picoult)

Many of us look to a time when there will be wider acceptance of gender diversity in society. Such acceptance would value people for who they are without judging them against norms of others. It would be characterised by positive support and encouragement. Like rejection and tolerance, acceptance can be a consequence of increased awareness. The circumstances that lead to this particular outcome are not widely understood. It is probable that acceptance is more likely when the change or situation is presented positively, in a way that mitigates fears. But there are other factors at play such as the influence of love, faith, or deeply held personal values. More significantly, it may also depend on the extent to which the situation or behaviour is understood.

Acceptance: I believe in equal rights for everyone. When I say equality, I mean equality for everybody. Why are you telling people who they can and cannot marry? This is 2014

Greater awareness can lead to unwanted rejection, unsupportive toleration, or to acceptance. One factor that might influence the outcome is the degree to which the public understands what they are aware of. Education might have a significant role in encouraging awareness to grow into acceptance.

Understanding

Understanding is how we think about something and develop concepts to comprehend it. Understanding requires knowledge, but it goes beyond facts. Knowledge alone cannot lead us to observe and interpret our surroundings. The acid test for understanding is rather simple; if a person says they understand something, then they should be able to explain to others what it is that is understood. In the context of seeking acceptance, understanding someone helps deal with unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations in a positive way. When you understand another person then you can relate to them and to what is going on inside them. It is possible to tolerate or accept someone without understanding them. We all experience some fear when we encounter things we don't understand, so acceptance without understanding rests on an impressive lack of prejudice and a live-and-let-live attitude toward life.

Understanding: Dale Hanse was honest in that he said, knowing Michael was gay made him uncomfortable because he didn't understand it but that he could accept it because many other things in life make him uncomfortable. In the absence of understanding it is of course much easier to reject and seek the comfort of bigotry. Conversely understanding does not guarantee acceptance.

Understanding: I understand why gays want the same rights to marry as heterosexual couples, but I cannot accept that they should be married in our church

The path from ignorance to a sympathetic acceptance of gender diversity starts with awareness. But what happens after that is less certain. It is a rocky road! Historically we have found ourselves tolerated by some, rejected by many, and only accepted by a few. The media is currently showing much greater interest in gender, resulting in an increase in awareness. Ensuring that this awareness flows through to acceptance may rest on informing the public understanding of gender. Unfortunately few of us are able to explain what we understand about our gender, and our differing explanations reflect our own diversity. But without clear consistent understanding can we reasonably expect society to move to accept us?

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Blog Export: Sensuous in Satin, <http://adrian.tgr.net.au/blog/>

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Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 10:25

Friday, June 5, 2015

The elephant in the bra

Breasts are perceived in our society as a symbol of femininity, a determinant of fashion, and a measure of beauty. So in the transgender community it is unusual to find someone expressing themselves in a feminine way without the shape of breasts. We talk a lot about how a feminine upper body shape makes us feel.

But I find it interesting what we don't talk about.

At some point, most of us will purchase some breast forms. Breast forms are heavily marketed as having the look and feel of "the real thing". But as consumers how would we know? Are we being taken for a "bouncy" ride?

But that is the point of this posting. A lot of us do know.

Many of us started our expressions of femininity wearing breast forms, and end up growing "the real thing". Along with post-mastectomy patients this large group actually knows how breast forms compare with natural breasts "but try searching on Google. It appears that no one actually wants to provide any objective feedback.

Why is this? Do the breast form manufacturers sue if any objective observations are published? Is it just modesty that stops us sharing information on something so close to our femininity?

Well I've experienced home-made gel bags, breast forms, and now a pair of 16B boobs. And I'm game to tell the story just like it is!

First a couple of caveats in case I get sued. This has to be my own personal observation. I have not had implants and cannot comment on that experience. And I am aware that breast form technology has advanced over the past few years (as have the marketing claims) and cannot comment on that.

Who exactly does the feeling?

Breast forms are heavily marketed as "feeling natural".

These Breast Forms are made of 100% medical grade silicone. These are soft to the touch and natural in feel.

All Amoena breast forms have the look, feel and texture of a natural breast.

Only 100% Super Soft silicone is used in our breast forms. They look, feel, warm and bounce like natural breasts.

We want to be feminine so it is natural to assume the forms look and feel natural to us! But this isn't a claim anyone makes.

Silicone also feels like a natural breast through clothing

Close physical contact, even a hug, will not reveal that you are wearing one,

If the advertiser doesn't say it feels natural to the wearer, then how natural is the look and feel of breast forms?

Let's be objective.

Weight

Real breasts don't tear at your skin. They don't sit like lifeless forms in your bra. The breast has muscle in it, and has no more a feeling of being attached and having a weight than does your bottom. Until age catches up with you and it goes saggy and pendulous a breast doesn't appear to weigh anything. So don't waste money getting weighted breast forms! The more you feel the weight of the form the less you have a "natural" feeling.

Sensation

At few times when tissue is growing, breasts are very tender and sensitive. But in the steady state they are mostly just tissue. They don't have the heightened sense of touching things that we imagine even though they are more prone to hitting things than a flat chest. So this is a similarity with inert breast forms.

If left unsupported in the gym or pummeled they get sore (a bra has a real function which is turns out to be more

important than looking good!). And of course natural breasts have nipples which respond to being touched â€” but expecting a breast form to emulate that would be a bit unrealistic.

Cleavage

Real breasts are the same colour as your skin. I know this is obvious, but a breast form can only give you a fake cleavage. And the more you tape and push things to create a â€œlookâ€• the less things will feel like the real thing. Natural breasts create a painless cleavage that feels â€” well natural.

Comfort

The area of your chest in contact with a breast form has sweat glands. And sooner or later you will have to remove the breast form and wash the skin. A natural breast may get a bit itchy underneath, but you can always just take it for a dip in the pool!

Shape

The design of breast forms has progressed to the point where often they have a more perfect shape than many natural breasts. Iâ€™m not sure how this affects the look and feel experienced by the wearer, but if it does, a well selected breast form is a clear winner.

And the final score

Is the experience of wearing breast forms a natural one?

Weight â€” No

Sensation â€” Close

Cleavage â€” No

Comfort â€” No

Shape - Maybe

My personal conclusion is that breast forms do not, and cannot, feel to YOU the same as real breasts.

They are actually quite noticeably different.

Which of course explains why the advertisers do not make that claim.

But that doesnâ€™t make natural breasts better.

There are still plenty of good reasons to use forms.

For a start, they will not affect your health, can be removed when they are inconvenient, and can be changed to suit your mood. Not to mention the money you will save! And if you enjoy the way they feel to you so much the better.

Although they may look and feel like real breasts to others, what you are feeling isnâ€™t actually like the real thing. It actually is just another compromise on our journey!

Perhaps some honest advertiser might actually say that one day!

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Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 14:51

Friday, March 20, 2015

Do you wish women would dress more femininely?

In the New York Times Sheela-Marie Padgett says:

“I do feel like sometimes I have to be more feminine than anyone else,” said Ms. Padgett, the onetime New York City Ballet dancer. “There have been so many times when I’ve been on the street and I realize I’m the only one in a dress and heels. I reach for those things that are more feminine than a genetic girl would go for. The stakes are higher for me because I wasn’t born female so I don’t take it for granted.”

Which may explain why many of those who discover they are transgender also like to wear high heels and skirts. But here is my take on over-dressing.

If you take a broad perspective and look at women throughout the world you find that femininity is socially constructed and differs greatly. There are aspects of femininity that a society defines through dress and others that are reflected in the behaviour and personality of women. I don't want to re-open the bottomless discussion on "what is a woman" - so I will restrict my observations to femininity expressed through dress.

When I started exploring my gender (that also was a long time ago!) I had a very narrow view of what femininity looked like. It was a view cultivated by observations from the other side of the river - where I had been trapped all my life. At that distance the characteristics of womanhood that could be easily spotted were high heels, skirts, stockings and makeup. These physical characteristics were re-enforced by my early exploration within a support group - a group that had only recently relaxed a rule that members must wear skirts or dresses to meetings. Putting on a skirt and heels developed into a feminisation ritual, a periodic purging of maleness and an invitation into a new more feminine world. My dress rules were derived from examples of extreme femininity in the media; so the heels got higher, the skirts got shorter, and you could say that over-dressing became the norm. I knew I was more feminine because I was wearing clothing that men don't wear. And everyone I met in public knew I was transgender because to be honest I would often have looked like a groom dressed as the bride's mother.

All rituals have their place, but this "dressing" one just became inconvenient with time. I found that the preparation to become feminine with its ever increasing list of associated tasks made it difficult to go out in public. 2 hours to get ready and 10 minutes to buy the milk! So I drifted with time to a broader understanding what it meant to be feminine.

The new feminine was modeled more on everyday women in our society and it didn't require a ritual. In came the slacks and casual tops, out went the stockings, heavy makeup, and all those painful heels. And because I wasn't defining two different lives by the clothes I wore, I started feeling far more engaged with my femininity, for more of the time. Now, I don't want to pretend that all I have in my wardrobe are slacks. I still enjoy the opportunity to celebrate my femininity by "glamming up" for a lunch with friends, or an evening out. But I don't feel any the less feminine when I'm not in celebration dress. You might expect that seeing me heading out to the shops in a T, slacks and flats with hardly any makeup would be a recipe for being 'read' and abused. But you will have to take my word for it, the opposite is true. Perhaps that has something to do with the way I feel inside now. A feeling that broadcasts my femininity other than through dress and appearance... but that is something to explore in another blog entry!

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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 16:45

Tuesday, December 23, 2014

Brain Sex - does it exist?

Without wishing to curtail the fun we can have taking 'tests' to demonstrate we have a transgender brain - the serious question remains "Is there such a thing as a female or male brain".

Brain sex is a lovely concept - after all it leads to the prospect of a diagnosis that confirms one is gender diverse. But do we all want it to exist more than the evidence supports?

A few months back I went on an Internet search triggered by a forum post where someone asserted:

Research from the recent WPATH conference that is coming out of Amsterdam, indicates neuroscientists have proven beyond doubt the existence of two completely different organs; that being the female and male brain. Their research was not based on the actual physiological construction, but more realistically on its neurological functioning.

My doubts about this "fact" lead me to this summary web page which certainly provides a challenging alternative view: sexnotgender.com/brain-sex-does-not-exist/

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The web page contains a summary/reference to a number of other sources - some of which I have extracted below to entice you into further reading.

It is hard to believe that people continue to support these antiquated "brain sex" theories without reproducible and unambiguous scientific proof.

www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/the-great-sex-s...-20130201-2dpx5.html

There is little evidence of real differences between the male and female brains, writes Catherine Armitage.

Neuroscience is methodologically flawed. Even when an effect is objectively measurable, small sample sizes and poor statistical significance plague brain imaging studies. Most results are not replicable and, often, the alleged "findings" are not even based on human research. Extrapolating functional or behavior qualities from these studies is logically tenuous at best.

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When females topped the state in maths doctors were surprised. When a bloke scooped the pool in languages, they couldn't believe their eyes

It seemed to defy not just stereotypes but brain science when girls topped the state in every mathematics course in the NSW Higher School Certificate last year, even though more boys than girls studied maths.....

Hyde, one of America's leading academic psychologists, concluded that "78 per cent of gender differences are small or close to zero".

"When you think of it", says Connell, "all the biological-essentialist ideology depends on the idea there are natural bases - hormones, brains, genes, take your pick - that produce big mental differences between men and women, and these explain the social differences.

"If it is not true that there are big psychological differences, the whole argument that there is a fixed biological basis for the social differences collapses."

So why, if the evidence is so thin, does the idea of a biological basis for difference in male and female abilities persist? No prizes for guessing Fine's answer: "It helps to make the status quo seem fair, natural and inevitable. It's comforting to be able to look around at the considerable sex inequality that still exists and blame different brains, rather than sexism, socialisation and discrimination."

www.annelawrence.com/twr/brain-sex_critique.html

A Critique of the Brain-Sex Theory of Transsexualism

The brain-sex theory was never helpful in explaining clinical observations; now it has become irrelevant to explaining neuroanatomical observations. It is time to abandon the brain-sex theory of transsexualism and to adopt a more plausible and clinically relevant theory in its place.

The brain-sex theory of transsexualism has never been easy to reconcile with clinical reality: Homosexual and nonhomosexual MtF transsexualism are so different clinically that it is almost impossible to imagine that they could have the same etiology. Nevertheless, for a time the Zhou/Kruijver data gave the brain-sex theory a certain superficial plausibility. In 2002, Chung et al. reported new data that raised serious doubts about the brain-sex theory, but the authors were able to explain why the theory might still be plausible. The new data reported by Hulshoff Pol et al. in 2006 did not invalidate these explanations, but it rendered them largely irrelevant. The simplest and most plausible explanation of the Zhou/Kruijver findings is that they are attributable, completely or predominantly, to the effects of cross-sex hormone therapy administered during adulthood. There is no longer any reason to postulate anything more complicated.

sexnotgender.files.wordpress.com/2014/02...usions-of-gender.pdf

Delusions of Gender

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Drawing on the latest research in neuroscience and psychology, Cordelia Fine debunks the myth of hardwired differences between men's and women's brains, unraveling the evidence behind such claims as men's brains aren't wired for empathy and women's brains aren't made to fix cars. She then goes one step further, offering a very different explanation of the dissimilarities between men's and women's behavior. Instead of a "male brain" and a "female brain," Fine gives us a glimpse of plastic, mutable minds that are continuously influenced by cultural assumptions about gender.

www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674057302

Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences

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In this compelling book, Rebecca Jordan-Young takes on the evidence that sex differences are hardwired into the brain. Analyzing virtually all published research that supports the claims of "human brain organization theory," Jordan-Young reveals how often these studies fail the standards of science. Even if careful researchers point out the limits of their own studies, other researchers and journalists can easily ignore them because brain organization theory just sounds so right. But if a series of methodological weaknesses, questionable assumptions, inconsistent definitions, and enormous gaps between ambiguous findings and grand conclusions have accumulated through the years, then science isn't scientific at all.

Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 15:24

Saturday, October 18, 2014

Too exhausting being a woman?

A TRANSGENDER woman encouraged to have a Â£10,000 (\$19,000) sex change by Katie Price wants to become a man again "because it's "exhausting" being a woman.

Chelsea Attonley, who was born a boy called Matthew, said she is tired of putting on make-up and wearing heels following gender reassignment surgery seven years ago.

"It is exhausting putting on make-up and wearing heels all the time. Even then I don't feel I look like a proper woman," Attonley, 30, said, according to The Mirror in the UK.

I'm not sure I agree that transitioning (in the sense of expressing your true gender and not the gender you were assigned at birth) is difficult. Changing your gender expression has risks, but being honest is, I suspect, easier than living a lie. It was for me.

What I think is difficult is understanding your gender identity. Understanding it with sufficient confidence that you can take the correct steps to transition to achieve a true gender expression. All too often I think the haste to go somewhere precludes a meaningful consideration about where.

The temptation is ever present to assume that if man feels wrong then woman must be right. We look at other's transition stories and assume that they must be correct for us. We form support groups that tend to re-enforce our choices rather than question them. And the result? People like Chelsea select a borrowed transition that isn't theirs. Often this results in a journey to be a woman where the concept of what it means to be a woman is brushed aside as an inconvenient (and I suspect unanswerable) detail. The focus is on a sex change, but surgery can't automatically make anyone a woman.

If you have convinced yourself that you need to be a woman then you can slip easily through the medical hurdles and check points on the route. I recall once being advised before a job interview to adopt a fictitious persona (Robinson Crusoe I think) to score better at the personality test. The more you believe you should be a woman then the harder it is for a psychologist to detect if you are telling the truth, and also the harder it is for you to confront your own gender reality.

I don't view transitioning as a logical extension of crossdressing. Transitioning aligns your gender expression with your gender identity, resulting in an expression that has consistency; this is not the same experience as cross-dressing full time. Crossdressing to many means high heels, makeup, fancy underwear and skirts. Others have pointed out the connection between this and being a woman is tenuous at best.

I'm guessing that Chelsea succumbed to a convenient destination - crossdressing full time (or perhaps being a drag queen full time in this case?). Having reached the destination she discovers that crossdressing full time is hard work, and doesn't actually express her gender identity. So sadly she assumes the only options are binary and she must go back to where she came from.

Chelsea should be grateful that she is still alive, as so many others take their life when they find that their chosen destination is inconvenient, impossible or just wrong. But her chances for the future, if she doesn't pause to find her true gender identity, seem bleak.

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 12:34

Wednesday, July 23, 2014

Transgender Transitioning vs Transexual Transition

I was revisiting some old bookmarks today and came across again the web pages by Lynn Conway titled "Basic TG/TS/IS Information"

<http://www.lynnconway.com/>

I'm not sure how much these articles have been updated since they were written, nor how much they need updating, but I was interested to read her views on Transitioning.

A couple of years ago I wrote a post about the need to understand transitioning in a broader context. I re-read Lynn's take on this - where she in fact proposes there are two types of transitioning.

Over the past few decades many transsexual women have undergone transsexual transition, including both a social change of gender and a surgical "sex change" of the genitalia, and have then gone on to live successful lives in their new gender. Many media stories about these cases have helped society gradually become more aware of, tolerant of and accepting of the notion of transsexual transition. Most states now have well-established procedures for changing public records of name and gender for those who complete a transsexual transition. Many employers now even have procedures in place to accommodate people going through transsexual transitions.

More recently, many transgender people who do not have intensely transsexual feelings, have begun to openly undergo transgender transition. Some are crossdressers finally overcome by TG feelings and the need to take on a female social identity. Others are drag queens who've long enjoyed participating in drag shows, but then who finally recognize the strength of their mixed-gender feelings. Most of these transitioners begin transition by taking modest doses of female hormones (enough to produce some degree of feminization) and by undergoing electrolysis to remove facial hair. When feminized to some degree, they shift their full-time social gender by dressing to some degree as women, modifying their voice and mannerisms to varying degrees, taking on a female name, and obtaining some forms of formal identification in the female gender. Thus they achieve varying degrees of social gender transition WITHOUT transsexual SRS surgery.

As transgender people have become more aware of the opportunities for social transition, the number of these TG transitions has risen dramatically. Many gender counselors now see far more transgender transitioners than transsexual transitioners, especially among their older clients. Acknowledgement of the validity of transgender transition is an important new trend, since there clearly are many more transgender people than transsexual people in the wider gender continuum.

Some TG transitioners migrate into a "transgender" social role instead of trying to pass as women. These transitioners may actually feel uncomfortable about becoming "fully female" in presentation and mannerisms, and they are especially uncomfortable about modifying their genitalia. They instead feel a need to take on a transgender or androgynous social role that better matches their mixed-gender identity. Such transitioners often remain visibly transgender and are comfortable in that identity, and their social lives outside work usually involve people in the transgender community. Many TG activists, support group moderators, speakers on TG issues, etc., are people having such openly transgender identities.

Whilst I can relate to much of what Lynn describes, I don't feel that she makes a compelling distinction between transgender and transsexual transitioning. It seems to me to just depend on whether you have or have need to modify your genitalia.

Lynn goes on to say in the article: the casual use of the term "transition" sometimes leads to confusion I certainly have experience of this confusion, in conversations with those who in their mind are puzzled that my transitioning has no need of a surgeon's knife. Embracing the concept of two types of transition would I feel only make this confusion more widespread.

Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 15:13

Monday, June 23, 2014

I feel like a woman

We all know how hard it is to talk about our gender identity to others.

Often the words we have to express our feelings are inadequate, ambiguous, or misinterpreted.

So we can talk but others don't get the same message.

In our quest for acceptance we strive to be understood. But how often do we question if what we are saying has any shared meaning? When we talk about gender we aren't talking about sex, physical external genitalia, or appearance. We are talking about something intangible, a feeling. And feelings are notoriously difficult to communicate.

Let's look at what is a very common example of this non-communication.

I know that many members will have tried to describe their gender by a reference to it being "that of a woman".

Over the years I have asked many people what it means to have the gender of a woman, what it means to feel as a woman. And what I hear is that there isn't a single, commonly held view.

What is more surprising is that genetic females show the greatest divergence of meaning. I've yet to hear the same interpretation twice!

People in society don't in general ask - what does it feel like to be a man, or what does it feel like to be a woman.

And so we haven't established any shared understanding.

So when we say to someone we feel like a woman, what the listener interprets that to mean can be widely different to what we meant.

Being aware of the differences is probably a good start to improving our communications

Posted by Adrian at 15:05

Tuesday, August 20, 2013

Empathy and the woman inside

What defines being a woman It is commonplace in the transgender community to hear the assertion: "I am a woman inside". This claim increasingly attracts my curiosity, to the extent that I frequently challenge people to explain what exactly they mean by "a woman". It is a tricky question, I'm sure there isn't a right answer, but the responses I get are illuminating. At a recent restaurant night I found myself talking with a genetic female friend about the issue of "being a woman". Or more specifically what we might mean when we say "We want to be a woman" or "We feel we are a woman". I suspected that what many of us think of as being a woman, isn't what defines how women think of themselves. The lady I was talking with paused and then said with some conviction that to her, being a woman meant being sensitive to needs and feelings of others. So let's run for while with that definition of "being a woman" and see where it takes us. Being sensitive the needs and feelings of others does imply a heightened awareness - an awareness that is often referred to as empathy. According to Wikipedia empathy is "the capacity to recognize feelings that are being experienced by another being."

Empathy and the real woman If it is indeed true that "thinking like a woman" requires empathy, then does that make empathy an essential characteristic of females? Many people perceive that there is a considerable difference between males and females in this regard. Frans de Waal discussed this issue in his book *The Age of Empathy* and concluded that:

...it's true that at birth girl babies look longer at faces than boy babies. Growing up, girls are more prosocial than boys, better readers of emotional expressions, more attuned to voices, more remorseful after having hurt someone, and better at taking another's perspective. Boys are less attentive to the feelings of others, more action- and object-oriented, rougher in their play, and less inclined to social fantasy games.

Actually it turns out that the issue of gender differences in empathy is quite controversial. And as is frequently the case there are academic studies that point either way. I wonder if the confusing results arise in part from the researchers focussing on the physical sex of their subjects rather than their inner gender! With a lack of consensus perhaps it is safest to assume that empathy isn't necessarily a particular and exclusive strength of genetic females. But also acknowledge that thinking, and therefore by extension behaving, like a woman, might rest on a heightened awareness of the needs and feelings of others. Empathy in the Transgender Community Let's now turn to look at our own transgender community "a community where many of us seek to express ourselves in varying degrees as women. With such a wide diversity across the gender spectrum it is neither necessary nor valid to assume that everyone internally needs a strong sense of empathy. But amongst those who seek to be accepted as women in society, it may be an important factor in determining outcomes. So I was curious to explore the extent to which our feminine gender expression is based on a foundation of empathy. Along with our quest to express greater femininity do we display or develop more empathy? Empathy, like our true gender identity, is hidden inside our brains. It isn't something that lends itself to any deterministic physical measurement. So to look for empathy we can only observe the consequent changes in behaviour. To find out the prevalence of empathy in the transgender community we could ask people to evaluate themselves using whatever crude tools are available. Looking on the internet I found surveys to evaluate Empathy Quotient such as <http://glennrowe.net/BaronCohen/EmpathyQuotient/EmpathyQuotient.aspx> The necessary selection of "gender" at the start of this questionnaire is somewhat troubling. If a "Scientific" evaluation requires such information, then it probably isn't going to produce reliable results in our community! And asking an individual to assess their empathy, after empathy has been identified as a desirable characteristic, is going to produce somewhat questionable results. So I turned to looking at behaviours I could passively observe, behaviours that could point to the prevalence of empathy. Empathy on-line A year or so ago I started by looking in the TgR online forums. Communication through email and forums encourages emotional detachment, which in turn often leads to hostile and insulting interactions (flaming). I was curious to see how people behaved when they engaged in emotive discussions. Without the key empathy drivers of facial contact and body language was there any evidence of sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others? I looked to see how often people were remorseful after having obviously hurt or offended someone through what they said in the TgR forums. Obviously I couldn't tell if there had been a private exchange of emails "all I could look for was a follow-up posting expressing empathy for the feelings of others. I was surprised to find that a search for the use of the word "sorry" in such a context yielded just 80 posts out of over 14,000. And of those, only 7 could be generously construed as expressing remorse about the effects of some prior posting. Of course it could be that no one hurts or offends anyone in our forums - but I know that is far from the case. And maybe it is only my generation who use the word "sorry" to express remorse. But such an infrequent use doesn't point to a lot empathy in the online community. Empathy in real life A key aspect of empathy is taking another's perspective - being able to feel yourself in "someone else's shoes". So when we meet socially, empathy might manifest itself in sympathetic behaviour towards others. I watched how we interact socially, but what I became aware of was in fact the

opposite; I observed that sometimes transgender people completely ignore the needs of others when meeting in a social context. After my thoughts were reinforced by some "complaints" from partners I wrote a post titled "Did I tell you about ME". In the article I commented on this apparent lack of empathy:

Well imagine you sit down next to a total stranger in a restaurant and are looking forward to having a pleasant evening's conversation. But instead all the stranger can talk about is themselves! They provide you with an unwanted and unsolicited description of their life, possibly their medical history, and even details of surgery. Worse still, at every attempt to change the subject to something of mutual interest they keep returning to their pet subject - "Me". Our own experiences are of course incredibly important ... to us. But with a strong sense of empathy surely we might be expected to sense that the interest was not shared. Empathy in relationships There is a more important behaviour that can be observed " more life changing than sitting down to dinner next to someone who bores you to tears. It is the way we sometimes relate to our partners. The tensions that gender diversity introduces into established relationships have been widely discussed. Many look for a robust response from partners whilst acknowledging the likely outcome is separation. Continuing and building on an established relationship is frequently seen as requiring "compromise", and often this is mentioned in a negative way. Compromise is, in part, seen as "not being true to oneself". If true femininity rests on being sensitive to needs and feelings of others, surely it would also manifest itself as putting the needs and feelings of others above one's one. Perhaps compromising to respect the emotional needs of a partner could actually reflect a more feminine way of thinking. Elusive Empathy So, where ever I looked, I found examples of behaviours that were inconsistent with a heightened awareness of the needs and feelings of others. And the more I looked, the more I could identify in myself the very seeds of what I was seeing in others. In general, and allowing for exceptions that you could drive a cart and horse through, I saw the most disturbing lack of empathetic behaviour in those who considered themselves to be most "woman" inside. Nothing I have written would on its own stand up to the test of scientific scrutiny. But I found no compelling evidence that, as we seek to express more of the "woman inside", we all also consistently develop a stronger sense of empathy. Which leads me to a final and probably highly controversial thought? What if the opposite was true? Wikipedia goes on to say that the opposite of empathy (atypical empathy) is exhibited in a number of personality disorders, including narcissistic personality disorder. Atypical empathy is characterised by

"a lack of empathy and an unwillingness to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others"

Could it be that the psychological challenges of being gender diverse drive some of us in the direction of narcissistic behaviour. And in doing so, make it harder for us to achieve our desired goal of thinking, feeling and most importantly behaving like a woman. Even if this is not the case, it is a possibility that I think we should all be aware of.

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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 12:02

Sunday, December 16, 2012

Society does not accept transgenders?

Is it true that society doesn't currently accept Transgenders?

I watch the mixed reception that others either receive in society or more often fear they will receive.

Whilst I don't present in a gender ambiguous way at work (or I try not to) - I do live most of the rest of my life projecting my femininity - through clothes, physical features, and lifestyle choices. For several years now I've been very comfortable being 'me' in public, and, like you, I haven't received the much feared backlash from partner, family, friends, or society at large.

I wonder what aspects of my experiences could explain having such a charmed life. Hopefully they might provide clues for others to anticipate the reactions they will get.

1. The Message

Part of society's reaction to us seems to depend on what message we are giving.

The message I send is "I'm a boy who is very much a girl inside". It seems that this is something that few people (except perhaps a very unobservant partner) find challenging. I don't care if others accept me because "I must be gay" or if they explore deeper and discover this isn't the case - it isn't for me to demand the level to which they engage in exploring gender diversity. Even my 91 year old father recently observed that he saw no evidence that the world was cleanly split between boys and girls. The message doesn't challenge conventional norms based on binary genders but rather invites the listener to acknowledge the existence of other personas outside these norms. I think this to some degree encourages shared discoveries and mutual learning.

On the other hand I see many who confront society with the message "I am a woman". The reaction they get is more mixed. Though many of the institutions of society accommodate this message (largely due to some recent enlightened changes to legislation) I feel the general public does not as a whole. The assertion that you wish to be considered as, and treated identically to, a woman is an open challenge to the way most individuals view the world. It doesn't challenge the society norm of there being two genders, but rather attempts to blur what each binary gender actually is. A lot of people, and certainly partners and family find this message very challenging and often resist it. I'm not for one moment suggesting that many of those projecting this message do not genuinely feel they belong in the "woman" box but rather the reaction they get from the public is, to a large degree, understandable.

The final message I hear is "I'm just a crossdresser". The implication of this message is a request for society to treat the person as a "normal" man but allow for their desire to express femininity through clothing. The common response to this is an acceptance (often heavily qualified). Reactions range from it being an OK thing to do in private if you want, to perhaps an accepting amusement (particularly by shops). The reaction of the public to crossdressing outside the house or sheltered support groups does appear to be mixed. And I think it depends heavily on a second factor.

2. The Attitude

In the public forum good things seem to come to those who project an aura of total confidence in who they are. It doesn't matter if you feel you are a woman, or if you just dress up for the occasion, if you project fear, inferiority, or discomfort then the reaction of the public can just make matters worse.

I know this sounds a bit like one of those self-help books in the airport bookshop but truly "Believe in Yourself and People Will Be Forced to Believe in You". It's beyond me to suggest how you as an individual can achieve this perhaps you should buy a book! But there are many examples of people in our community who project their self-belief.

It is years since I came out of the closet, but for much of the time afterwards I felt I was exploring gender "trying to find a way out of what was still a confusing situation for me. Fairly recently I stopped trying to apologise for "crossdressing in public" and for "not wanting to transition to a woman" and became proud of exactly who I was. With that pride came a confidence that allowed me to organise mega-events such as TransFormal, tell my friends,

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and present a positive image of "me". In all of that I have never encountered anything more adverse than an occasional double look.

So my conclusion is that a lot of the reaction you get from society is a result of the message you need to project, and the confidence with which you project it.

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 09:55

Tuesday, September 18. 2012

Did I tell you about Me?

I guess you know the feeling?

Something is obvious to everyone, it's embarrassing to others, but yet no one says anything about it?

Well I have something obvious and embarrassing that I think we should talk about in these forums.

On several occasions I have told partners and others that I would post about "this matter" on their behalf. But I always chicken out because, as the bearer of bad news, I don't want to be shot (or pick up a shocking hit to my reputation!).

So please accept that what I'm about to say is not just my own personal grudge or obsession. It appears to be widely observed, obvious and to many others, acutely embarrassing.

What am I referring to?

Well imagine you sit down next to a total stranger in a restaurant and are looking forward to having a pleasant evening's conversation. But instead all the stranger can talk about is themselves! They provide you with an unwanted and unsolicited description of their life, possibly their medical history, and even details of surgery. Worse still, at every attempt to change the subject to something of mutual interest they keep returning to their pet subject - "Me".

Well it appears that many gender diverse people are guilty of this sort of egocentric behaviour.

Somewhere in the journey from gender ignorance to gender awareness many of us become so self absorbed with our own lives that we cannot relate effectively to others in society. It seems that we are so self centered we have no receptors open to the needs and interests of others.

It happens at social events (and I have had many complaints). But you can also see the same thing happening in our forums. How many times does the topic seem less important to the poster than sharing their latest life experiences with the group. Thankfully this has been less of an issue since we provided members with Blogs - which by definition are always just about "Me". But it happens - we sometimes just can't help ourselves it seems.

Of course we feel we have an excuse. Some of us are making momentous steps in understanding ourselves, our past, and our future. And we just want to share our enlightenment with everyone... and anybody... whenever we can. In the right context, sharing our experiences can be a great help to others. But we have to remain aware of when and where is the right time to talk about "Me".

Maybe we can lay the blame on the rise of vacuous status updates on social media like Facebook. When Facebook asks you to tell the world about yourself every day why ask if the world is actually interested? With the ability to tell everyone about ourselves as often as we want we have perhaps become desensitised to what others want to hear.

At the start of our journey, our love of photographs often verges on the narcissistic. But all that photography has a funny side to it, and hardly seems to impact on the attitudes of others towards us.

But as we move from fun nights out to serious re-alignment in society an inability to talk about anything other than "Me" is insidious. It has far reaching implications on our acceptance by, and re-integration in, society.

So did you know the feeling?
Is the observation of others correct?

I think it is!

I would suggest we need to raise our consciousness of egocentricity if we are to integrate with and seek the acceptance of society at large.

Let's not talk about "Me".

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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 21:59

Monday, September 10, 2012

Choosing a name

Choosing a name is often an important start in our journey of understanding ourselves. But we often make that choice very early in our journey of discovery. Which means we choose a name without any real understanding of its implications for the future.

I suspect that I was not alone amongst many of our "older" members in having to choose a "femme" name on joining one of the support groups like Seahorse. I guess that in these times, the choice often occurs when selecting an alternative email address or social media identity.

At this early stage in exploring our gender identity often secrecy and privacy are upper-most in our minds. And choosing a completely different "femme" name meets that need for anonymity. With the first opportunities to express a more feminine gender, choosing a very "girly" name seems to underline the significance of the steps we are taking. It is a chance to say goodbye to boring drab David for a few hours and explore the exciting new future opening up for Gwendolyn!

For some of us, the opportunities to express a more feminine gender are confined to the internet, support group meetings or perhaps occasional outings in public. For someone forced to switch in this way between David and Gwendolyn that initial choice of name, with its re-enforcement of the split persona, may well remain appropriate and comfortable.

But for many others our journey of discovery leads us to present our gender identity more frequently. And in that context the name we first chose may no longer facilitate the changes we are looking for.

One of the early actions frequently taken by those who decide they wish to present a feminine persona to society is to change their name legally. Often this means legally selecting that same name chosen in the euphoria of coming out. Having worked through all the paperwork and official bureaucracy to change names on everything from academic qualifications to power bills it is perhaps too late to reflect on the appropriateness of that initial "femme" name!

So perhaps it is timely that I present a case for adopting less overtly "feminine" names.

A) A feminine name cannot change how you are perceived by others. In many cases the harsh reality is that others will perceive you as a feminine male or a masculine female. If that is the case, then fewer questions will be asked if your name matches that perception. If you are called "Chris" then the name fits no matter what is read. A Gwendolyn with a deep male voice is asking for a little more acceptance.

B) For many (most?) of us our journey will not include changing physical sex. So for those who transition to express their gender full-time an unambiguously female name combined with a male sex is bound to cause practical difficulties with bureaucracy. It would be nice if we could change these stereotype associations overnight and throw away with those forms asking for "sex" and the archaic salutations of Mr and Mrs. But without widespread change in society that initial feminine name can easily be a liability in everyday life.

C) There are many names that are perceived by society to be unisex. A recent informal survey we ran showed that maybe up to a 1/3 of TgR members have at least one legal name that is perceived as unisex. Just think how convenient it would be just to stick with that legal name as one goes forward on one's journey of gender discovery. No issues with society over changes of name, or names not matching official records. Though such a name would perhaps be seen as boring and unfeminine when first coming out they can be far more practical for so many of the paths we find ourselves exploring later on.

So perhaps the onus should be on those who collect and encourage "femme" names to educate. We could make it clearer that femme names, far from being a necessity, may turn out to be a burden to carry on our exciting journey of gender discovery.

Thursday, August 30, 2012

Women crossdressing

The premise that "society allows women to cross-dress" is frequently aired when we are looking for a justification that cross-dressing is normal and OK. But the truth or otherwise can only be discussed if we agree what constitutes cross-dressing. Sadly, along with just about every other term used by the gender diverse, cross dressing is subject to redefinition by the individual to suit their position and needs.

I don't respect this right of everyone to define terms to suit themselves. So I reach for definitions before engaging in discussion. In this case I commend the following authoritative (but perhaps not correct) sources.

Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cross-dressing>) defines cross dressing as

"the act of wearing clothing and other accoutrement commonly associated with the opposite sex within a particular society".

It also stresses that cross-dressing

"denotes an action or a behavior without attributing or proposing causes for that behavior."

merriam-webster (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cross-dressing>) defines cross dressing as

"the wearing of clothes designed for the opposite sex "

Queensland Association for Healthy Communities Inc (QAHC) defines crossdressers as

"individuals who have an overwhelming desire to change their presenting gender, on an occasional basis, to that which is opposite to their birth sex."

From these definitions I think it is reasonable to conclude that cross-dressing
> is the action of presenting in clothes associated with or designed for the opposite birth sex
> is performed for diverse reasons not necessarily only gender expression

We can also note what is not part of the definition.

Firstly the style of clothing is only pertinent when it reflects the expectations in society as to the the style, color, or type of clothing men and women are expected to wear. "Only girls wear pink". What matters when considering if someone is cross-dressing is what sex the clothes were designed for or attributed to.

Secondly the reasons behind cross-dressing are not part of the definition. So any "nice feeling that we all seem to get when we are dressed" is not a fundamental or defining characteristic. You are cross-dressing whether you put the clothes on for disguise, entertainment, gratification or gender expression.

So where do that leave women in our society?

Wearing slacks and shirts designed for women clearly doesn't constitute cross-dressing by these definitions. Neither do women in general exercise any freedom to wear clothing supposedly designed for the other birth sex. Quite frankly I can't see they would see any attraction in buying trousers from the drab menswear range in Lowes. A few women do crossdress - either for gender expression (gender queers) or entertainment (Drag Kings) but this doesn't constitute evidence of women having any special freedom of choice.

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On a personal note, as I haven't changed my birth sex I accept that my general presentation to society is cross-dressing. After all I buy all my clothes in the ladies section of the shop and my assigned birth sex is male.

This is a much wider definition of what a CD is than many gender diverse people are comfortable with. In particular many of those who eventually change their birth sex assert they have never cross-dressed. But as I stated at the start, I'm not comfortable with people redefining CD to suit their purposes.

Most of our gender diverse community are cross-dressers to some degree or another. I don't think it is true to assert that most would agree that "women cross dress all the time". I certainly don't.

Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 19:58

Thursday, June 14. 2012

SOV - Save our volunteers

Have you ever considered how much we rely on volunteers in our Gender Diverse community? Everything from practical offers of help, through organising cafe and restaurant nights, to running TgR happens because of volunteers.

We all benefit from those people who are generous with their time, their skills and sometimes even accidentally their money.

But, in general, volunteers seem to get a rough ride, and few stick it out for very long. Does anyone else wonder why that is? What causes volunteers to burn out so often?

I have been volunteering for TgR and other organisations for over 15 years now. And it's true to say that in that time I've had some pretty rocky times as a result. So the fact I have survived probably means I have some experience to share.

On reflection I think I have learnt one important lesson:

"No matter how dedicated you are, your motivation to help can be easily undermined by the actions of a few"

How much we would all benefit if more people were empowered to volunteer more often in our community!

Here are two "volunteer killers" that personally affect me, and I suspect many others.

Killer 1: Selflessness

This is how volunteers kill themselves - by selflessness - doing things just for others.

It sounds great that you are putting all this time and effort into something just so that others may benefit.

But the harsh reality is that pleasing everyone is an impossibility

- organise a party in a secluded location and some will feel we are hiding from society; hold it in a public location and some will be excluded because they are not comfortable in public.

If you volunteer just for others, you will soon find that everyone is not grateful and supportive, and the negative comments from a few will leave you let down and your effort devalued.

In the past I have found that just one angry person can destroy all possibility of feeling the effort was worth while.

The solution for me? Forget the unselfish motives, and focus on ensuring that if you volunteer then you also personally enjoy and get something out of it (definitely not \$\$\$!). That way the effort is validated by what it meant to you, and the negative opinions of others lose their importance.

Killer 2: Helping from the side lines

This is how some destroy the volunteers - by their unsolicited suggestions of how things could be done differently, better, cheaper, or whatever. Often well-meaning suggestions, sometimes even valid, but always thrown at the volunteer with the implication that volunteers are there to do things the way others want it done. One thing that characterises all those who try to help from the side-lines is that they have no intention of actually volunteering to do things better themselves.

It is time to realise that unsolicited criticism like this may actually be interpreted very negatively by the volunteer.

If the volunteer appears to be unwilling to accept your opinion it may be because :

- a) they are the one who has decided to do something,
- b) they expect to be allowed to do it on their terms, and
- c) the only thing they really want from you are offers of practical help!

Most of us want to improve, and in that context getting feedback is very important. But the right time to provide feedback is when the volunteer seeks it.

The challenge

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There are some positive things members can do to ensure that volunteers are rewarded and encourage them to keep on *â€˜doingâ€™*.

Not killing off our volunteers so quickly may result in a better and healthier Gender Diverse community.

Things like:

â€¢ Helping ensure that volunteers enjoy their volunteering

â€¢ Remembering that it is better to have something done for the community, even if it isnâ€™t *â€˜perfectâ€™*, than to have nothing.

â€¢ Choosing the right time to offer feedback , and presenting both positive comments as well as your suggestions for improvement

â€¢ Offering to help, or even better, starting something for the community yourself.

Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 11:44

Friday, May 11. 2012

Liberating the term Transitioning

Whilst writing the 2001 TgR Survey report I have been careful to ensure that a reader outside our community can understand the results. This meant looking up definitions of the words I used and checking that their meaning was as intended.

My primary reference source is Wikipedia, and I was (pleasantly) surprised when I read the definition of "transitioning".

Here is the first paragraph from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transitioning_\(transgender\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transitioning_(transgender))

Transitioning is the process of changing one's gender presentation to accord with one's internal sense of one's gender - the idea of what it means to be a man or woman.[1]

For transsexuals, this process will also involve sex reassignment therapy, and their new sex is "opposite" that of birth sex; for intersex people it is different from how they were raised; for genderqueer people it is neither solely female nor male.

Cross-dressers and drag queens and drag kings tend not to transition, since their variant gender presentations are (usually) only adopted temporarily.

Transition must begin with a personal decision to transition, prompted by the feeling that one's gender identity does not match the gender that one was assigned at birth. One of the most significant parts of transitioning for many transgender people is coming out for the first time.[1]

Transitioning is a process, not an event, that takes anywhere between several months and several years. Some people, especially genderqueer people, may spend their whole life transitioning as they redefine and re-interpret their gender as time passes.

Transitioning generally begins where the person feels comfortable: for some, this begins with their family with whom they are intimate and reaches to friends later or may begin with friends first and family later. Sometimes transitioning is at different levels between different spheres of life. For example, someone may transition far with family and friends before even coming out at work.

The general nature of this definition was what took me by surprise. I read the words and realised this was describing exactly what has happened in my life. Now i will be the first to admit that by Wikipedia's standards of review - this article isn't a first class entry. It may just be one persons view. But it happens to be a view that I totally agree with.

I guess we all frequently hear the word "Transition" used to indicate a process by which those born as male sex have various surgeries, and start a new life in society as a woman.

How many times have I heard people asking "Are you going to transition?" or "Are you going full-time".

Well maybe it is time to liberate these concepts from the narrow interpretation that a small segment of the gender diverse spectrum has placed on them and use them in a way that embraces the journeys of many in our community.

With this definition, I am proud to say I have transitioned and consider myself "full-time" (except at work...but of course that is a different story for many of us). Is that going to confuse you?

Posted by Adrian in Gender Diversity at 11:50

Sunday, July 3. 2011

Are you crossdressing or seriously wanting to be a woman?

The following comment was posted in response to someone who asked:
Are you crossdressing or seriously wanting to be a woman?

Now I know, like Shakespeare, you can read too much into the words used on forums... but my first thoughts were that this was another case of mistaking something we do "crossdress" with something that reflects our inner gender (wanting to be a woman).

Crossdressing is defined by Wikipedia as the wearing of clothing and other accoutrement commonly associated with a gender within a particular society that is seen as different than the one usually presented by the dresser.

So it is by definition "part time".

As we know women crossdress freely, and many men like wearing female clothing just because of its fabric and style. But many people's gender journey starts with crossdressing, and at some stage, even if one yearns to be a woman, occasional crossdressing may be the only manifestation of it. So it appears that crossdressing and a journey to be a woman, are far from being mutually exclusive and we

"can be crossdressing AND seriously wanting to be a woman!!"

Then, as others have observed before in this thread, the original question doesn't leave room for any middle ground.

I have become aware that there are many members of our community who don't desire to be anything other than themselves. To those people applying a label like man or woman to who they are is meaningless, and often insulting. Life just isn't that simple! Depending where they are on the gender spectrum, these people may not consider themselves to be crossdressing and their destination doesn't have a simple label like "woman". So that means we

"can also be NEITHER crossdressing nor seriously wanting to be a woman!"

As I said, 6 years is a long time in exploring your gender identity and developing, and I know I might answer this question differently in another 6 years time.

But, for now, I think I would find it is difficult to apply the label "crossdressing" to my presentation.

Why?

Because what I wear is consistent (virtually all my clothes carry a women's size tag) and because the image I present 24/7 is not completely "male" or "female".

So my clothes reflect correctly the fact in my gender I seek to be neither "man" nor "woman".....just me.

That means my vote falls for "NEITHER crossdressing nor seriously wanting to be a woman" which sadly wasn't one of the options given!

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 21:59

Wednesday, August 12, 2009

Can wearing a wig really change your personality?

Many crossdressers are born out of a mid-life crisis that cannot be resolved by purchasing a fast sports car. They may have dressed in secret for much of their adult life and have the experiences of a conventional marriage, family, and career behind them. Then in mid life, finally there is both the time and the imperative to address issues of gender and explore the hitherto hidden girl within.

I don't care much for scientific classifications that pigeonhole sections of the transgender population. But it is an inescapable fact that I have found myself part of a large group of girls all of whom had a superficially similar mid-life metamorphosis. Faced with similar problems it is no surprise that we seem to come up with similar solutions.

In this article I am going to generalize about the mid-life crossdresser experience. My observations are based on many years working in a support group and innumerable conversations, but as with all generalizations there will be exceptions. My aim is not to suggest that all mid-life crossdressers are, or should be, treated the same, but rather that we do frequently display common characteristics. Understanding more about the common path we follow can help us interpret correctly the signs we see along the way and assist others in relating to us as we make our own personal journey.

When a transgender comes out as an adult she carries the psychological baggage of many years of mature male life; her life is cluttered with family, social and emotional constraints. In the process of coming out she must not only determine who she wants to be, but also find out what from her past is still relevant. The awakening of the girl within holds both the promise of realizing long suppressed desires, and also the threat of damaging important relationships that have been built up over time.

The emerging girl naturally seeks to project an image of herself as a female. But the risks attached to coming out frequently constrain how and when this can be done. The safest option is to separate and quarantine the female and male aspects of their life and explore each separately. And so from the one personality we frequently see two different personas develop one male and the other female. The extent to which a split persona develops differs between individuals, but all mid-life crossdressers seem to manifest it at some time to some degree.

Seeking the best of both worlds, the crossdresser often retains an essentially unchanged male persona for family and work whilst developing a female persona amongst her newly found girl friends. Because female and male behaviors are kept separate the new female is not constrained to develop out of the male, and frequently establishes itself as different and in complete contrast. This can come somewhat as a surprise to someone who is familiar with the crossdresser as a male. It is common to hear such girls explain how they are a different person when they put a wig or skirt on. A more likely truth is that their inner personality is unchanged but when dressed as a female they are projecting a very different external persona.

The unconstrained female persona is often great fun and can be an effective way of exploring who we are. An accelerated development allows the crossdresser to squeeze many years of a genetic woman's life experiences into a whirlwind few months. It allows an exploration of possibilities without commitment, and of experiences without judgment; all frequently facilitated by access to a middle-aged line of credit. And with no need to consider the everyday she can enjoy the impractical, trying out large breast forms, high heels, long wigs and delicate lingerie. Showing less restraint than a kid in a candy store the new girl has only one constraint, to keep this new life separate from the boring drab existence of being male.

But the separation of the female persona also presents a significant risk. It can be such fun and so addictive that it becomes confused with reality. So much so that when she comes in contact with her past, in the form of partners, friends or children, the outcome can be unexpected and disappointing. From an outside perspective the female persona is often self-centered, shallow and pleasure seeking. Worse still it may be so different from the person others are familiar with that they feel they are relating to a stranger. The frequent assertion that I am still the person you married may be true, but the persona being projected is often far from the same.

Clearly living as two personas, managing to keep them separate, and selecting the right one at the right time, is difficult. It also feels unsatisfactory as each persona is in some way a denial of the other. As a result few girls maintain the separation for an extended period of time and those that continue do so out of necessity rather than choice. As the

mid-life crossdresser becomes more comfortable with their sexuality and with what they want to be, they develop in a way that reflects the relative strengths of their male and female personality. .

Potentially the least satisfactory evolution is where the need to be female is suppressed by the risks attached to crossdressing. Occasionally a crossdresser will abandon the female persona and go back into the closet. Invariably this is a result of pressure being applied by partner or family. Few crossdressers share their experiences after making such a forced denial.

Some girls progress by throwing away completely their old male side and living full-time as a female. This allows them to adopt their female persona and develop their personality, in so far as it is possible, to match. They frequently lose the support of those who cannot live with these profound changes. This can be a difficult path to follow but is the only practical option if the male persona no longer holds any attraction or relevance.

More frequently mid-life crossdressers evolve in a third direction. Faced with the reality of having to maintain, to some degree, their former male role and interests, the crossdresser starts to merge the two personas. Their personality gradually morphs to include the desired characteristics of both being male and female. The girl invades the life of the boy pushing at the boundaries of what may be socially expected or normal but this presents little risk in a society used to labelling such behaviour as gay. In the reverse direction the girl becomes more practical developing a wardrobe and interests more consistent with a genetic woman of her age. The crossdresser may still lead a life with separate activities and friends but as the two personas merge it is no longer necessary to consciously switch between them. Often all that is required is some residual care about sharing personal information, particularly at work but this is not a problem unique to crossdressers! And without a wig as a reminder the girl may have to think more carefully which door to use in a public toilet!

The visible changes associated with this evolution are often subtle. Girls talk about growing their hair rather than wearing wigs, preferring small natural breasts to uncomfortable forms, removing facial hair, having manicures, and of course their underwear becomes more practical and comfortable as it becomes everyday.

The psychological changes that occur can however be profound. It appears that freed from the artificiality of a split existence the transgender personality within can grow stronger and mature. Girls describe how when dressed as a man the earlier feeling of gender denial diminishes, and when dressed as a girl it feels more complete and permanent. In stark contrast with the earlier candy store phase, which frequently leads to impulsive and potentially destructive decisions, the balanced personality seems to result in ultimately more satisfactory life choices.

So if the majority of mid-life crossdressers head down this third path what happens next and where does it ultimately lead? Obviously, that is something that only an individual can discover. The options and opportunities still ahead are numerous, and whilst many girls start their journey in the same way this provides no clue to their final destination.

In conclusion I am proposing that when a crossdresser comes out in mid-life they frequently adopt a female persona that neither reflects their inner personality nor is sustainable. This appears to be a valuable stage in our development that also presents significant risk. Different individuals evolve at different rates in different directions, but many girls appear to gradually modify their male and female personas to establish a more balanced transgender personality that forms a basis for their continuing development.

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 12:46

Monday, May 1. 2006

The world is changing so should we?

An article I wrote for the Seahorse NSW magazine a LONG time ago!

For seven years now I have been on the Seahorse executive, firstly as Treasurer and more recently as Vice President. With this continuity comes a heightened sensitivity to changes that have occurred in that time both within and outside Seahorse.

I'm sure we would all have been aware of positive trends such as

- o The increased use of the internet, both as a source of information for crossdressers and also as the preferred medium for communication.
- o An increased awareness of crossdressing, not least because of frequent articles appearing in women's magazines
- o An increase in the proportion of crossdressers who have actively supporting partners

In the last couple of years we have seen a rapid acceleration in these changes. I want to take this opportunity to explain why I think Seahorse needs and deserves to change in response. The opinions expressed in this article are my own, and not those of the Seahorse committee.

Change is a difficult subject to discuss in what is essentially a fairly conservative group. When things are going well people see no need to do things differently, and when things are going less well they are frightened to rock the boat and make things worse.

For several years now our membership has fallen. Whatever the exact number we can always assure ourselves that the society is the right size and that bigger is not necessarily better. But I see this as a trend that could soon have a serious impact on the viability of the Society. We are already finding that the society cannot muster a satisfying response to an organized event be it a Ball, a restaurant night or a quiz.

That this membership trend might be due more to changes external to The Society than within is of even more concern to me.

It is vital that we remain relevant as we move into an era of growing acceptance, less domestic secrecy, and widespread Internet use. I think it is time to critically review the way we relate to society at large, and the services we offer to the transgender community. I accept that this might not be comfortable to some members but ask that we all think of the well being of our society first.

I want to highlight three areas that I feel are clearly no longer aligned to the environment in which we now operate. There are undoubtedly others that could be identified by a more thorough review.

Interviews

Firstly, the interview process we use is discriminatory and as a result many potential members proceed no further than sending in an application form.

We routinely disadvantage country members who are not afforded the same opportunity to come to an interview with the committee. But far worse in my opinion, we discriminate against crossdressers who are not yet ready to come out in public and be interviewed. Instead of reaching out a helping hand to the timid, we deny them membership, magazine and contact.

I believe we should have a more open approach. The committee interview is a dated concept that is now hindering the work of the society not helping it.

An alternative could be to "interview" through a sponsoring member on the application form (much like joining a golf club). With enhancements to the "Big Sister" programme and more public open meetings we could easily help new members find a sponsor and clear the interview hurdle.

Meetings

The second area for change could be in the type of meetings we hold. The closed-door monthly social has a valuable

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role in transitioning crossdressers from the closet to society by providing a safe and supportive environment. But as crossdressing becomes more acceptable in society, we need to look outwards more and consider the image we are projecting. Do we want appear to be a secret society in a world that would accept us?

I believe the society should hold its main regular monthly event in a public venue, open to anyone to attend. The Cooks River Motor Club is one obvious venue but I'm sure others could be suggested. By sponsoring such a regular event for the TG community we would provide a positive image of the society. It would also make it easy to recruit new members, helped along no doubt by a door charge for non-members.

On the other hand I think the Hunters Hill social should be retained and focus on its primary role of providing support rather than entertainment. It should be free, with a low organizational overhead, and only be open to members and their partners. The committee meeting could easily be merged with this event (to provide more flexibility in the organization of the society).

Magazine

Finally, we regularly lose members because they do not expect, or want, to communicate by post. The magazine is a valuable resource, but printing and mailing it out is time consuming and costly. In an age where many people read the daily newspaper on-line, a society that does not offer to communicate electronically (and renew subscriptions on-line) becomes increasingly out of touch.

I believe we should enhance the society website to provide access for members to magazines and membership renewals. It would also be appropriate to follow the Gender Center's example and make printed mailouts available less frequently, or for an increased subscription.

The AGM is coming!

The 2006 AGM will be held on Friday 26th May and your new committee will be elected. This is not an annual formality, particularly not this year, as key positions will be declared vacant.

Clearly I believe there is a significant challenge ahead keeping the society relevant in a changing world. However I did not write this article seeking a mandate for change or for re-election. After 7 years I want to take a break from the formality of being on the executive. Rather I hope to stimulate other members to take an active role in managing the club.

If you share my views that significant change is needed, step forward and help it happen.
If you feel that change would be harmful, step forward and help preserve what you see as worth keeping.

That way we will head into our new year with a vibrant committee, and a healthy discussion about the future.

Amanda (421)

For the record on;y one person voted in favour of change!

Posted by Adrian in Seahorse NSW at 21:15

Wednesday, April 16, 2003

Do you have a ticket for your destination?

“Mummy when I grow up I want to be a nurse”

From an early age most of us are able to separate our ambition and dreams from reality. Even though children live in a world of their own imagination they know the difference between playing at being a nurse and actually being a nurse. No tears are shed when you tell the child that they will have to wait before they can work in a hospital.

We often use different language to communicate our goals and our reality. If my dream is to stop work in ten years time when I am 55 and play golf till I drop, would I tell my family that I am “an early retiree”? Or would I separate the dream from reality by announcing that I “hoped to retire early”?

In many aspects life is a journey, with an ultimate destination or goal and the steps we take to achieve that goal. The stops on the way often have labels, such as “Student”, “Full-time employment”, “Promotion”. And the goal also has a label such as “Nurse”. Confusing the destination with the stops on the way is mixing dreams with reality.

Have you got a ticket for your destination, and do you know the stops to get there?

“Mummy I’m going to be a transsexual so I need to crossdress”

Battles unfold every day in the transgender community when someone labels themselves or others. Think of sentences with the words “Crossdresser”, “Transsexual”, “Hormones”, “Surgery” and “Full-time”. How often are these labels combined to justify some action or difference in actions? Why does this cause conflict and argument when labels are such a fundamental part of every journey in life?

Faced with such divisive arguments people often deny the need for labels. They seek to avoid conflict by advocating a cohesive community with shared goals. But this implies that we are all on the same journey, and all sitting in same carriage, in the same station. Without labels there can be no journey, no destination, no diversity. To deny the obvious differences in our community is remain in our dreams and never surface to reality.

“Mummy I’m wearing your dress so I must be a transsexual”

The general public perceives a difference between a athlete born with male genitalia participating in a women’s event, and finding their husband gallivanting round the house dressed in expensive lingerie. They will probably label one as a transsexual and the other as a fetish. These labels have meaning. But when they meet a lady wearing a dress can they perceive if the person was born male, how often they wear a skirt, if they are taking hormones, or what genitalia they currently have?

If a label neither materially changes the perceptions of others, nor changes their expectations of how they wish to be treated it has little value.

The label “on hormones” is frequently used in our community, But it just leads to more questions such as “which hormones?”, “how many hormones?”, “how long for?” and so on. Such labels tell us nothing on their own and are highly subjective. Although they have no factual value in communicating where we are on our journey we persist in using them to assert some superior status or to justify some other action. It is this use of labels that seems bound to cause conflict.

The transgender journey is not a race, and the route to our various destinations are not the same. We don’t all pass through the same stations and our stops different in length. When we think of labels for the steps to our goal, we must remember they are not necessarily relevant to others. Often the only value in being able to label our stage is to reflect achievement towards a personal goal.

Some sensitivity and awareness to the subjective nature of these labels would go a long way to reducing conflict and argument. If the stops on our journey are an objective assessment of reality their labels will be meaningful and of value

to others.

“Mummy, I am a transsexual so does that mean I can live full-time as a woman?”

We have seen that the labels for the stages of our journey should be grounded in reality. In contrast, the labelling of our goals ultimately comes from our dreams. Driven by unrelenting inner pressures, each transgender person is heading somewhere; though like a good mystery tour, where we are heading may not be obvious to everyone at the start. Our destination is often not printed on the ticket.

Sharing our goals and destination is important. The label we assign to those dreams should have value and meaning to others. It can allow them to provide appropriate advice and counselling, put our decisions into context, and understand how long and difficult the journey might be.

Sadly it seems that many of us spend too long in our dreams and we find it easier to journey in our mind. Labels for the stops get confused with labels for destinations, and the dream is no longer where we are going, but how far we have gone. We confuse others whilst deceiving ourselves.

The statement “I am transsexual” starts to take on an ambiguous meaning encompassing everything from labelling the first stop on the journey - “I’ve just discovered that I’m really a girl and am about to embark on a long journey of transformation” to the final destination - “My transformation is complete - I’ve had surgery and now am indistinguishable physically and mentally from a genetic female in society”.

When important labels are devalued in this way we do ourselves a disservice. Communication with those around us is obscured, and through misinterpretation we create conflict or confusion.

Perhaps the only person who can state “I am a transsexual” is someone at the end of their journey. But having reached their destination, and handed in the ticket, the label would probably have little value. For everyone else the label is an expression of a goal, and like the child wanting to be a nurse, perhaps they really mean “I want to be a transsexual”.

“Mummy, please take me seriously I have a diagnosed Gender Identity Disorder

Before we leave the subject of labels, we should touch on a third category of label. Sometimes we find it necessary to explain why, and how we are travelling, just as we might explain that we are in town on “a business trip”, or travelling “first class”.

On the transgender journey it isn’t as simple as who paid for the ticket or how much they paid. Often a diagnosable medical condition might be used to explain why we are travelling, and the doctor we are seeing might explain how. But once again the information provided by these labels is of little value to others. Are we really saying that a diagnosed status is a different reason for travelling than an undiagnosed condition?

When we describe the attributes of our journey in this way, the labels we use are often a barely disguised request for others to take our trip seriously. If we are seen to be travelling “first-class” then we may gain more respect and credibility. But the very same actions belittle the motives of those travelling behind in economy.

In what must be the ultimate example of label re-use, being “transsexual” extends beyond being a destination, and beyond being a description of a stage, to become the very reason for travelling. Is it any surprise that describing ourselves in such an ambiguous way is interpreted as being divisive?

“Mummy when I grow up I want to be a transsexual, so can I cross-dress in your clothes now and play at being a nurse?”

Individuality and diversity are fundamental properties of the transgender community. Labels have an important role in communicating our different goals and identifying how we are progressing on our journey. We use them to let others know the destination on our ticket and the station we are currently passing through.

The label on our ticket may be an intangible goal towards which we strive, but we should describe our current progress with an objective verifiable label. When we ignore this difference it is no longer clear to others if we are travelling or if we have arrived. Nor can they tell if we are actually travelling or if we are just journeying in our imagination.

So what is the destination on your ticket?

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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 13:53