

Friday, October 12. 2018

Travel Overseas with an F

Sometimes our winding journey through life takes us in unexpected directions. A few years back I would never have thought that one day I'd be writing about travelling overseas as a girl. Back then the idea of hopping onto an international flight without having to dress up as a boy was, for me, unthinkable.

I have always been a regular overseas traveller for family duty, work and leisure. As I became more comfortable expressing my femininity in everyday life here in Australia, I became less excited by having to dress "in disguise" to go on holiday. And so I started to push the boundaries and see what happened. Androgenous in Eastern Turkey (surprisingly no issues), so definitely more feminine in Greece (a breeze), and totally female dress in India (some strange looks but lots more smiles).

Whilst I found that generally what I wore didn't greatly affect the way I was treated overseas, there were a few situations where my pulse would rise and I entered a state of heightened alert. One was passing through immigration (the puzzled looks from grumpy officials), another was passing through airport security (body scanners and pat downs), and finally was the perennial dilemma - using public toilets. I should stress that at no time has any of these situations actually resulted in anything worse than some embarrassment but...

..as my gender journey took another bend, I found that I could apply for an Australian passport which stated I was female. The ability to change a primary identification document in this way without having surgery is a big plus for Australia. After a lot of thought I decided that whilst having a "female" passport wouldn't radically change anything overseas, it would provide a legal basis for my appearance if anyone turned feral on me.

And so I have just returned home from a long holiday to Italy, passing through immigration/security 19 times - all the time presenting my brand new passport with an F on it. I'd also taken the precaution of booking my airline tickets with the matching title - Ms.

Did it make any difference other than to my peace of mind?

I certainly felt more comfortable when handing over my passport each night to the hotel we were staying in. And in general there were far fewer puzzled looks from officials...except for one, entering Thailand for the first time.

I fronted up to the immigration in Bangkok with my brand new passport (when you change your gender on a passport they issue you with a new one for free). The stern faced lady on the desk scanned the passport, flicked through the pages, and started asking questions. "Had I been to Thailand before?"..Yes..."When did I last visit?"....2 years ago...and so on. Then her tactics switched and she just flicked through my empty passport, looked at her computer screen, and then stared at me for what seemed like a very long time. I just stared back - two can play at that game! Finally, almost begrudgingly, she stamped the passport and let me through. Then, looking back, I realised what had puzzled her. On her screen were about the last 6 or so pictures taken of me as I passed through Bangkok over the years. And in all those pictures I look particularly boyish. The complete change in look and the clean passport rang alarm bells. But at least I wasn't led away for "secondary processing".

Finally a note of warning. I do choose carefully which countries I visit so as to avoid trouble. Turkey is the most marginal country I passed through this trip, and you wouldn't catch me flying into any more hard line Arab country with my new passport. I put the USA in the same "best to avoid" category for transgender travel. The humourless officials of the TSA would not I feel be amused by my change in appearance, change in documentation, nor some of the countries I have enjoyed visiting. That still leaves plenty of places for the new Adrian to explore as an F - South America is on the list for next year.

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 18:40

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 we 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

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

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

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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Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 20:37

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

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

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".

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

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.

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

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