

HOLDING MY BREATH UNDER WATER

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As a child I knew that I was different, but had no clue as to how or why. I just knew that I was. I assumed that I was a boy and acted like one. In the eyes of this child, there was no difference between the genders. It was unfathomable that there could be differences between boys and girls.

When the adults in my family told me that there were differences and that I was a girl because little boys had penises and testicles, I did not believe them. I did know what a penis was nor did it matter to me. While my cousins could pee standing up and I could not, I just assumed that I had not mastered that technique. I was who I perceived myself to be not what others told me that I was. I knew that I was not exactly a boy, but then again I was not exactly a girl either. I became genderless in my eyes, although my outward form of gender expression was always masculine. My mother and I had constant raging arguments from as young as age three about my having to wear a dress.

I played sports and rough-housed, hated the fact that I had long hair, and developed the habit of spitting from watching my cousins. My mother was mortified. Eventually people told me that I was a "tom boy" and that I would grow out of this phase. After hearing that a couple of thousand times I was conditioned into thinking that it must be true.

As I approached puberty I was in for quite a shock. I eventually learned that I was female, but also refused to give up being masculine as well. I continued to be genderless on the one hand and a hybrid of female and male, although never feminine. Unbeknownst to me not only were hybrids disallowed, but being latin there as a more stringent gender code to be applied. I was expected to catch a husband, have kids, and spend the rest of my life sacrificing myself for my family (not likely). Women were and are still expected to look and act in a particular fashion. According to societal expectations and those of my culture, women are not supposed to be 6' tall, have broad shoulders, large hands, a booming voice or facial hair. Society continues to demand petite birdlike appearances and demure behavior, but I wanted everything that my culture and society said was not right for women. I wanted big muscles, facial hair, broad shoulders, to be taller than the 5'3" that I grew to be, and more. I wanted freedom from domesticity, wearing dresses, marriage, childbirth and the chains that I perceived the women of my family to be bearing. Housework and cooking be damned.

Puberty revealed that what I wanted could not be. My body had betrayed me and my behavior would not be tolerated. I tried to conform and do the make up, long hair, dress, panty hose thing. I even tried nail polish. I never quite mastered the art of walking in heels. Femme was something that I was not. The hopes and dreams of others that I was a princess were not to be. When the other girls in school were fantasizing about that knight in shining armor galloping towards them on the white horse, I secretly fantasizing about being the knight. Despite these fantasies I remained clueless about my sexual orientation. As I got older I had a number of relationships with straight men. All of them were fine in the beginning then little by little they too wanted me to be more "feminine" or at the very least docile. As time passed they felt threatened and the relationships inevitably ended as we both grew more and more frustrated just interacting on a basic level. I was forever doomed to relationship hell and just could not understand why?

The answer came much later when I learned that there were others like me. For some reason unknown to me they had kept hidden. I had heard talk, all derogatory, about gay men, but the topic of lesbians had failed to even come up. I was clueless to the existence of lesbians until very late in my teens, but even then I denied it to myself. In my early twenties something miraculous happened. Like a curtain being parted it all came into view. I remembered having fallen in love at age 5 with a 20 year old woman named Diana who live in the same apartment complex as my family. I had the crush to end all crushes and followed her around like a puppy dog. She was married of course and I spent time with her and her husband, Dave. Then there was Dawn, the girl in 4th grade with the brown curly tresses and the shoulders of a Pittsburgh Steelers lineman. Then . . . you get the picture. It turned out that all of the women that I had related to and identified with in high school were lesbians. I just didn't know about it at the time.

I tried to duck the responsibility of labelling myself by asking a friend who was a lesbian whether I too was one. She told me that only by sleeping with a woman would I truly know the answer to that question. I was not thrilled with what she told me, but it turned out to be the best advice that anyone has ever given me. I realized that I had to decide for myself who I was. No one else could define me but me. Subsequently discovering that I was a dyke, I was off and running. At last, I had found my niche, my community. I embraced lesbianism as my salvation. It gave me the permission to break away from society's constructs and expectations regarding gender, body image and behavior.

I altered my gender expression by looking and acting even butch than before. This change in gender expression manifested in the way in which I dressed and acted. That I swaggered rather than swayed when I walked. How I talked. In what and who I projected myself to be. I could be as butch as I wanted and there was a place for me. For a time I had found peace. Getting to know the rules was just a matter of trial and error. However, while experiencing a great deal of freedom, I remained ill at ease without knowing the reasons for it. The feelings of being a misfit continued to surface at the most inopportune moments, but I became quite adept at batting them aside. What I was left with were a lot of questions, no answers, an incredibly negative body image and a strong sense of foreboding.

The dreams of having a moustache and beard which were prevalent in my youth, returned full force and grew during my dykehood. Waking in the morning to find myself smooth-faced proved disappointing. I kept these dreams and disappointments to myself. The taboo was too great for me to share with others. When I did see women with facial hair at the women's music festivals, I just about fell over. That was exactly what I wanted, but more. More hair. A lot more hair. I began to look forward to menopause which was just too far out of reach to be a reality. I had resigned myself to the fact that facial hair would never be. It was then that I saw two friends appear at a party fully cross-dressed sporting theatrical moustaches. I had definitely died and gone to heaven! I followed them quite speechless all night. That very weekend they both took me to buy my first moustache. Now the dilemma was where could I wear it. I was exciting and nerve-wracking all at the same time. I did eventually wear my moustache to a couple of events and parties and found that I was being cruised by gay men. It was definitely nice to be cruised, but being a dyke and all I was not interested in gay men, or was I? A whole new can of worms plopped itself into my lap. Oh, goodie, new issues and dilemmas to pour over.

This predicament died down for quite awhile and then reared its ugly head at a workshop

where genderplay was discussed. The fact that I might be transgendered had eluded me just as during my youth my lesbianism had. Right in the middle of this workshop I felt as if someone had grabbed me by the ankles and proceeded to hold me facing head down from the 20th floor of some office building. I did not want to tell my lover what I was going through. These feelings were just too deep, dark, and personal for me to discuss with her until I could figure them out for myself. I stewed and mulled for the next 24 hours and assumed that because the women around me who identified as butch were just that, I could not possibly be transgendered. This theory broke like a piece of fine crystal when 2 out of 3 who had been present at that workshop, revealed that they too were having gender issues. The third woman revealed that she had thought about it seriously on prior occasion, but that it wasn't for her.

I thought long and hard about who I was and why something as simple as a talk had triggered so many emotions. In the span of a few hours my entire world had gone topsy turvy. I was afraid that I would lose my lover, my friends, my job, the support and love of my family, my community, etc. Try as I might I could not hide from myself, although I continue to attempt it. Altering my gender expression had worked until that moment of clarity when the transgendered sign flashed before my face. I was going to have to do something about it fast before my big guts ate my little guts. An ulcer definitely loomed on the horizon. Intensive therapy and soul searching followed.

I realized that in addition to a variety of other things that I was incredibly uncomfortable with my body. Body image problems surfaced and persisted during the doubt phase. When I did come to terms with the fact that I was transgendered, it was primarily my physical appearance which proved problematic for me. It was not misogyny that brought me to this place. It was the total and complete dichotomy between how I perceived and felt about myself and how the world at large perceived me. I was afraid that I would not be able to "pass". I was afraid that the lesbian community which was my home would ostracize me as a straight male despite the fact that I am neither straight nor male. I was afraid that I would grow bald.

It seemed that no matter what I did, bodies and body images remained constantly on my mind. It played a huge role in my metamorphosis. I continued to worry about "passing". Could I pull it off? Would I be called ma'am today? Was my voice deep enough? When would the facial hair come in? I worried that my hands were too small or that my hips were too wide. In part these worries stem from a rigid code of what is deemed a man and is deemed a woman in society. In the United States even our fragrances have genders. Here, perfume is worn by women whereas cologne is worn by men. In Europe these are just fragrances. I knew from personal experience that in this fashion and in other subtle ways, society teaches that the identification of gender is first and foremost. Appearances and other cues provide distinguish markers between men and women, the only two options presently available. I had often observed others become obsessed in determining a person's gender. I became terrified that I would give off the wrong cues, that I would be humiliated or worse, beaten to a pulp.

Needless to say, the testosterone helped assuage these worries considerably. During the first year the most noticeable changes are as follows: There is a substantial change in body chemistry. Body odors increase and become more acrid. The clitoris enlarges and grows. The voice takes on an almost gravelly quality as it begins to change and crack. There is increased energy, water retention, and acne. Breasts appear to become slightly smaller or at least change shape. A friend has described the image as "soup in a baggie". Facial and body hair starts to thicken and darken. There is a

constant ache or sensation that makes you feel as if you want to stretch all the time. Shoulders broaden so that shirts no longer fit. Muscularity increases. Body fat redistributes to the upper belly as opposed to the lower belly. Hands and feet get larger. In some instances the individual grows an inch or more. I was not so lucky. Jaws and the facial structures square off. There is a change in hairline and mine was and is more dramatic than some of those around me. However, I am also substantially hairier than most genetic men that I know.

Explaining to others the monumental discomfort that I felt became an insurmountable task. The phrase "trapped in the body of the opposite sex" was coined in a poignant attempt to explain what I and others like me feel. While easy to understand, the phrase has been used too often and oversimplifies the complexities of the issue. I did not feel "trapped" within my body so much as I felt trapped by the expectations that accompany the body which I occupied. What I felt was remarkably uncomfortable with some aspects of my body. I know of some cases where the individual has felt discomfort with all aspects of body image. The term uncomfortable is the understatement of the century, but I can find no other word to explain it. It's like holding your breath underwater. At some point in time you know you're going to have to inhale. The price

From the moment that I come out to someone as transgendered, the inevitable questions arise: "Do you have a penis? Which bathroom do you use? Does your boyfriend/girlfriend know? Are you straight now?" People tend to forget that every one is different. Not all transgendered men (formerly known as Female-To-Male transsexuals) want penises. Some of us do and some of us don't. Some of us identify as straight, some as gay, some as bi, and some as queer. We come from all walks of life and take quite different approach to transition.

In retrospect, some of these questions seem silly. Sporting a full beard I doubt that I could escape arrest were I to enter the women's restroom at this time in my life, even if I shaved. But gender and body image are so firmly entrenched in the psyches of those that knew us before hormones, that these questions are not silly at all. Frankly, questions and our willingness to answer them in an open and honest manner is what promotes a better understanding of transgendered folk.

Maybe that is what these disclosures will do, promote a better understanding. Not all of us have severed our ties with the lesbian community. Despite the changes in my body I continue to consider myself a lesbian as well as a gay man, but that is another story and a can of worms unto itself. I for one am thankful that I have been socialized female and that I have had these experiences in my life. After all, life is an adventure of epic proportions.

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