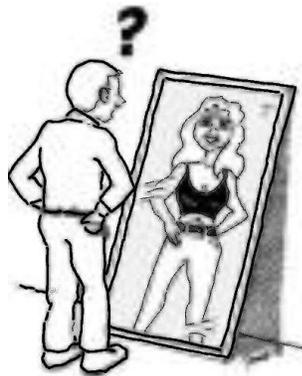




Gender: Spirit of Society
One Person's Experience



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The lesson this morning is from the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth verse of the twenty-second chapter, under the “*Laws of Separation*”:

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God.

Here endeth the lesson.

Short, not so sweet, pretty much sums up the Judeo-Christian-Islamic reaction to cross-dressing.

This morning, I will take a quick look at the social reaction to the cross-dresser in two rather disparate societies. I also want to look at what is known about or at least speculate about the why of cross-dressing. As you may observe, I will be speaking from experience as well as from research. Broadly, I will present what are pretty much facts derived from research then, I hope you will indulge me in some anecdotes and personal observations.

First let us look at a couple of bits of history.

The crime for which Joan of Arc was burned at the stake was the heresy of wearing men’s clothes. The French would, of course, not have stood for the English burning their heroine, but once she was properly convicted of heresy, she was fuel for the fire.

On October 5, 1513, Spanish conquistador Vasco Nunez de Balboa

discovers a community Of cross-dressing, males in present-day Panama and, according to eyewitnesses, feeds at least 40 of them to his dogs.

Most of the rest are lost in anonymity. The European persecution of cross-dressers is, of course, not at all out of character. Fired by the sort of nonsense that I read from Deuteronomy, Christian Europe has a long tradition of burning anyone who was at all at variance with the norm. Burning witches, homosexuals and heretics in general, why not throw a few cross-dressers on the pile as well.

Some other cultures, however, are not as intolerant.

In fact, among aboriginal cultures of the Americas, the concept of the man-woman or two spirited person was not just tolerated, it was celebrated. There are some one hundred and fifty documented cases of what Europeans called the berdache. The European word, berdache, itself is telling. Its etymology traces back to a Persian root word meaning a male slave or prostitute. The general consensus now is that the use of the term berdache should be deprecated in favour of using the native language word or the direct translation of that word, usually the literal meaning of words such as lhamana or bothe (a plains Indian term which was used in Guy Vanderhague's "*The Last Crossing*") is two-spirited or man-woman.

Aboriginal cultures acknowledged these people as a third sex. In some cultures, the level of sophistication extended to up to four additional such sexes over the European limitation of only two acknowledged sexes. The variations would have different terms for a male spirit in

a female body versus female spirit in male body and probably also distinguished between sexual orientation vs gender identity.

The story for all ages today was about a real person, however, like many stories it was made up. I called it “A Story of We’Wha”, not “The Story”. I knew what I wanted for the story. When I went looking, I found nothing suitable. In fact, I found nothing for children.

The gender dysphoric typically become aware of their difference at a very early age. Often at a much earlier age than when people become aware of their sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is latent until puberty when the maturation of sex organs initiate the release of hormones that activate the brain centres that are responsible for what we find physically attractive. Gender is more pervasive. We have gender long before we have sexual desires.

One would think there should be books to help children who become aware that they are different. Sensitive books that help the child and the child’s peer or play group understand who they are. Not a one. So I wrote a story.

You heard it earlier this morning. Based on a real person, actually an amalgam of real people. I don’t know that the Zuni children would react to a two-spirited child as I have portrayed it. It’s possible that they are enlightened from a very early age and that We’Wha would have been cherished by parents and tribe for her difference from the moment it became apparent. I needed a subject, so I found one who was accepted in her own culture and received recognition in a vastly

different culture. I imposed a bit of Jan Morris' autobiography and Euro-centric reaction and then attempted to resolve everything within what little I could glean of the actual culture. The idea was to introduce our hero in a situation with which our children are more likely to identify because it resembles what we would expect to happen in our own society, then resolve the story favourably for the heroine. To get such a resolution and to do so honestly, I had to morph into the aboriginal culture where such a resolution matches reality. I think even the children would not accept a positive resolution of the story in our own culture. It would not ring true.

I've never written a children's story before. Never really written a work of fiction. I hope I didn't do too much damage.

So... what do we know?

It's hard to find out. Time magazine had an issue in which gender identity was the cover story. In the article it was pointed out that about one in ten thousand births is physically androgynous. Usually, surgery is performed shortly after birth to remove whichever are the easiest bits to remove and to re-construct what's left. The assumption has been that gender is cultural and the child will adjust to however he or she is raised. In fact, such children do often feel out of place in their body. At the other extreme, the article acknowledged that some experts estimate that some degree of gender dysphoria may affect as much as 10% of the population.

Post Mortem analysis of trans-sexual individuals has found a tendency for male to female trans-sexuals to have an area of the hypothalamus, the central subdivision of the bed nucleus of the stria terminalis, to have a volume more characteristic of women than of men. The hypothalamus is critical to sexual function and post-mortem analysis of male homosexuals have found the suprachiasmatic nucleus and the anterior commissure to be twice the size of that in heterosexuals. These areas tend to be larger in heterosexual women than heterosexual men as well. Similarly, the interstitial notch of the anterior hypothalamus tends to be smaller in women and homosexual men than in heterosexual men. It's highly likely that milder forms of gender dysphoria are associated with less extreme or androgynous developmental anomalies.

I'm sure you don't want to hear a lot of arcane or obscure terminology for various bits of the brain. Suffice it to say that there is mounting evidence for physical cause for the various dysphorias which the Judeo-Christian-Islamic right have long condemned as abomination.

Let us be clear that gender dysphorics are not typically homosexual. Some are. Whether a higher percentage of gender dysphorics are homosexual than the general population may be so, however, I have not been able to find any material which indicates this is so. Given the apparent similarities in the causes of the two conditions, it would not surprise me to find out that there is some positive correlation.

The fact is, that gender dysphorics are not all the same. We have

the example of Jan Morris who from a very early age realized she was trapped in the wrong body and has never regretted (as far as I can determine) her sex change operation. I believe that Renée Richards, the tennis star who underwent a sex change operation has been quoted as saying that “you are never really accepted as a woman and you end up with a mutilated body.” Even so, there appears to be a tendency among the medical profession to deal with gender dysphorics as a set. Hormone therapy, live as the opposite sex while undergoing counselling and therapy then sexual reassignment surgery.

In my own case, I began to become aware of my gender dysphoria during adolescence. I don't believe I ever thought of myself as a woman trapped in a man's body. In my case, I knew I was male. There is no question of it. I only need look in a mirror. I have a very strong male component which is usually in control, however, below it all and pervading my existence is what I can only describe as an empty longing. I know what I am but I wish it were otherwise. I know that I can never be a woman, can never experience child birth, the special bonding with the child that only women can truly know. When I let it, that knowledge fills me with an intense sense of loss that is difficult to describe.

The term gender bending is usually applied to dressers such as I who make no effort to pass as a woman. I am a man. Perhaps it was in reaction to my female side that my male side has adapted some aggressively male characteristics such as growing a beard. This should be contrasted with those who go so far as to take hormone treatments

to soften the skin and who remove all traces of male hair. If you look at some of the trans-gendered web sites there are some remarkably attractive people whom you would be hard pressed to say whether they were not women. Much like the subject of the Suzanne Vega song that we played for the offertory, “they make really good girls, as girls go”.

When I cross-dress, I know that it is nothing like being a woman. It is, however, a personal acknowledgement of that part of me that is not happy with my maleness. It is more the acknowledgement to that part of myself that gives a bit of, not pleasure, really... the emotion is difficult to describe. This is how I prefer to dress in the privacy of my own home. I wish I could express this part of myself more. I wish there were stores which would cater to me as me. Do you know how difficult it is to get 12W shoes? The really fun clothes stop at size 12. And heaven forbid that I go into a store dressed as this and ask to try on that nice outfit.

As I’ve said a number of times, cross-dressing gives me a sense of completeness, an acknowledgement of a side of myself that I can not display nor acknowledge openly. This is the first time I have ever set out deliberately to appear dressed in public. I had to find out how this community would react.

When I was courting my wife, I raised the subject of cross-dressing and encountered such a negative reaction that I decided it would be best to repress that side of myself. And I did, pretty much, repress

this aspect of my being for twenty-five years. After we separated, I began again to let my female side express itself in the privacy of my own home. Later I would find that it is possible for a woman to be supportive of a cross-dressing man. It was like moving from a long darkness into the light, a wonderful experience.

We often hear the Christian right say that cross-dressers and homosexuals can be “cured”. Given my own experience, it’s quite likely that someone such as I who only has a strong female aspect but is predominantly male could repress the female side. But I have to ask: why should I?

There’s an old joke about seeing written on a washroom wall “My mother made me a homosexual.” and, underneath, in a different hand: “If I get her the wool, will she make me one too?” There may be some truth to it.

Over a decade ago, I read a brief report about experiments with rats in which the hormonal levels of gestating females were controlled, deliberately elevating the level of female hormone. The male pups that were born developed homosexual characteristics and would only mount other males. Possibly, hormonal imbalances during development of the stria terminalis could be responsible for trans-gendered development.

More recently, I recall a brief report on the radio about research in which it was reported that male hormones crossing the placenta from a developing male foetus can cause reactions in the mother to increase

the levels of female hormone. The research indicated that repeated pregnancies with male children could sensitize the mother and the probability of such reactions increased so that the incidence of homosexuality, at least, tended to be higher in younger male offspring. It actually makes an evolutionary sense if you consider a hunter-gatherer society, which humans have been until only the past few tens of millennia. If a woman has produced some number of what we'll call for want of a better term, "normal" offspring, then she can give her grandchildren a survival advantage if they have an aunt or an uncle who, having no children of their own, would help hunt or gather for their sibling's offspring.

Whether a similar case can be made for an evolutionary advantage in having the occasional trans-gendered individual, I can't quite see it, so the trans-gendered may just be a case of the timing being a little off when what nature was really trying to create was a homosexual.

On the other hand, I think I can make a case that for a gender dysphoric who is not convinced she is a woman trapped in a man's body but a man who has a deep and intense longing to experience the female condition, there is a deeper sensitivity towards women, a desire to know more. This translates to greater attention to the needs of ones lover. The desire to try to come as close to the female experience as possible, I might argue, makes the gender dysphoric a better lover. A woman might take the mighty hunter as husband but so long as she takes the two spirited as her lover, the genes will not be lost.

On a sad note and a depressing aspect of the trans-gender issue, consider the following: one web site I found in my research quoted a murder rate in the US of 119 murders per month per 100,000 male to female trans-gendered people. This rate is 16 times the US national average and three times the rate for African-American men who have the next highest average. A particularly frightening aspect of this murder rate is that murder by beatings and bludgeonings for trans-gendered is 19% while it tends to be only 5% for murders among the general population. This was a 1999 statistic. I would like to think that we Canadians are better than that, more accepting and less intolerant, but I couldn't find statistics. Perhaps that is a good sign.

November 20'th has been observed as the Transcended Day of Remembrance. An international day of observation organized in response to the murder of Rita Hester, a transsexual who was stabbed to death in November of 1998 in Brighton, Massachusetts.

Another note about the story for all ages: I had the story vetted by the chair of the children's religious education and Debbie suggested a change which I made. I do, however, want to make some additional comments. I had expressed We'Wha's early conundrum with the phrase "We'Wha knew something was not right" and Debbie suggested that I rephrase this as "We'Wha knew he was different". For the children, I made the change, however, I had originally chosen my words quite deliberately. The gender dysphoric may become aware of their condition anytime from early childhood through adolescence. In

our society the child may have already had their prejudices shaped by the sort of foolishness that I quoted from Deuteronomy to start. It is a shock to realize that one is an abomination to the lord our god. The first response is to ask what is wrong with me. It may take years before one can overcome the early negative stereotyping and come to an accommodation with oneself. It is an unfortunate aspect of our society.

There has been a lot in the news of late about the new health curriculum in the New Brunswick middle school system. I would argue that an important aspect of early sexual education must include a rational and fact based look at gender dysphoria as well as homosexuality. It would serve two important functions. First, for the gender dysphoric it would help them realize what they are and that we are simply another expression of the wealth of diversity which is the human condition. Secondly, for the rest of society, it would, one can only hope, begin to dispel the hatred and prejudice that is bred from ignorance built upon the nastier aspects of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic intolerance expressed in Deuteronomy.

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words have an incredible power to penetrate the psyche and hurt in a way that lasts long beyond physical pain. In a society such as ours, white heterosexual males do suffer from one disadvantage. We lack the ability to appreciate how deeply painful some humour can be. One Saturday afternoon I was working at something and the radio was playing in the background

and I became aware of the comedienne who was doing a stand up routine. She was saying “What’s with these men who dress up in women’s clothes, anyway? Do they think dressing up as a woman is anything like being a woman?” I can not remember whether the audience laughed at all. I don’t recall that she had been getting a lot of audience response. I do remember that these words hit home to me. They hurt. They hurt in a way that is difficult to describe.

I’m not stupid. Of course I know that dressing up as a woman is nothing like being a woman. It’s a feeble effort to acknowledge a side of my being that society despises. I am fully aware that, at best, I can only fantasize and the dressing helps my personal fantasy.

It was odd to be mocked like this. As I said, it hurt. I think it has helped a little for me to begin to understand and appreciate how similar humour hurts other disadvantaged groups. I try to be careful now with humour. It is too easy to hurt and not understand how deeply one has hurt another.

I encountered one of our members at the plaza at Priestman and Smythe. More to make conversation than anything, I think, she asked if I was going to Canadian Tire. “No, Pennington’s” I said. Rather than leave it at that, she wondered whether I might have a secret side then, I suppose trying to extract her foot from her mouth said “oh well, we’re a pretty tolerant bunch.” The situation was more amusing than anything else, however, there has been a small aspect of the

conversation that has nagged at me ever since:

We are a “pretty tolerant” bunch. There is a mystery and a power in words. We give them far more influence than they deserve. Tolerant. Even this word has implications. We talk of being close to tolerance or out of tolerance when work is not perfect. We tolerate something that is not quite right but is not worth the bother of fixing.

I have to ask, “what is there to tolerate?” If we are to be a welcoming congregation, we must move beyond tolerance. We must accept people as they are. My cross-dressing poses no threat, no harm, to anyone. It is not something to tolerate. If I can not be welcomed as I am... if my own desire to accept and acknowledge a powerful component of my own being is something that must be tolerated, then we are not where we need to be. We have a long way to go to be a welcoming congregation.

In summation and in brief, we cross-dressers are not monsters. We are no more threat to anyone than any other group. I like to think I am a good citizen, giving generously to charities, paying my taxes and expressing my concerns to my government. A harmless desire to acknowledge and express a strong female component of my being, however, makes me an object of ridicule to most and hated by many. I would argue that there is something sick here. What is sick here is a society that can not accept people such as I. A society that calls us sick. A society that breeds sociopaths who are so intolerant they hate

and will kill harmless people such as I. It is our duty to strive to heal the sick.

Blessed Be.



The author, at home.