

Where Are The Trans Folks?

"We never see them." "Aren't they activist?" "Why don't they participate more?" These are common "visibility" questions I'd like to answer—although this response is purely my own perspective.

To start, my gender is female, my private and personal sexual preference is lesbian and my very confidential medical history includes gender transformation. For me, this life experience has been all about gender change. During this process, I experienced three distinct stages, and each phase has had its special "visibility" issues.

I knew from the age of five or six that I was different and I was female, despite the fact that I had male physical attributes. I was immediately and harshly taught by my parents, teachers, and playground playmates to suppress my natural being and project a male image—or else! In response, I became a "male overachiever" throughout my life to acquire acceptance and affection from others.

The mental health profession calls this first stage gender dysphoria, a time of great unhappiness with one's gender. It is a lonely, private, hazardous and confused phase of denial and hiding, when I needed to know what my medical condition was and that help was available to me. The desire to be female is a chronic life-long issue and constantly present in varying intensities. Absolute fright of homophobic retaliation kept me invisible in this phase.

After decades of extremely intense personal pain, I finally sought help to begin my transition. This "coming out" as female first meant taking the very real risk—and dealing with the reality, as it turned out—of losing my family, my marriage, my children, my friends, my employment and profession, my place in my community and myself (as a male). Then it meant recreating myself and asking for acceptance as a "new" person.

This is the transformation stage and identifies a transgendered/transsexual person. It is the phase during which gaining visibility, support, and acceptance is critical, and is referred to as the "Real Life Test."

During this time, I not only attended and presided at my own "death," but I also gave birth to my new self. I sought and valued the support of the GLBT community as I came out, because I knew diversity was valued and we shared public acceptance issues. I also found the general (heterosexual) community at large has been absolutely wonderful in accepting me as a confident, productive female member of my community.

I found the greatest problems of understanding and acceptance with those who were closest to me, except with my sister, who has been a lifesaver and my closest friend. It is difficult for people so close to accept because they wish to hang on to the "old" person.

Another question that I hear a lot is "how do you refer to someone who is going through this transition phase?" Well, I personally preferred not to be known as transgendered during my transition. Rather, I wished to be known publicly as a woman, and confidentially as a woman transitioning through a gender change. After all, this woman was someone I have always been; during transition, I was simply, finally, making myself visible to the world. It was a time requiring understanding, acceptance, recognition, and validation from others; hence, visibility in every sense was a necessity.

Now I live in the last stage, post-transition. I feel at ease with myself, privately and publicly, and my gender dysphoria is gone. I have a new and enjoyable life. I am "visible" as an active, intelligent, personable, and interesting woman and an out and supportive member of my lesbian community.

However, for others who transition, visibility may not be the preference. For example, sometimes transitioning heterosexuals prefer to keep their medical histories confidential, on a personal and need-to-know basis; a wife or husband may choose to be far more private in their heterosexual world.

After all, gender recognition—except for bisexuals—is often inextricably linked to sexual preference and related activities. Lesbians and gay

men seek partners of the same sex; heterosexuals, partners of the opposite sex. And like others, for those of us females and males with a transgender medical history, gender visibility is not only a matter of being correctly identified for who we are, but an asset in identifying our sexual preference if it is homosexual or heterosexual. However, this tidy little system only works as long as one is perceived as being one's actual gender, not neutered as "mixed gender" (transgender/transsexual).

In other words, having hidden through gender dysphoria and sought support through visibility during transition, in post-transition, assuming recognized gender roles and blending in as females and males is the desirable.

So I, and I believe others like me, wish my visibility related to my medical history to be consistent with other medical history cases—for it to be my choice. For example, generally speaking, those who have survived breast cancer or live with HIV or AIDS are likely willing to discuss this only on a very personal or confidential level.


Of course, any and all of us may make personal choices to volunteer for more visibility as an activist in order to educate or to change laws. I recommend anyone and everyone actively support GLBT organizations to fight for equal rights, equal opportunity, and acceptance of diversity, as it benefits everyone. ▼

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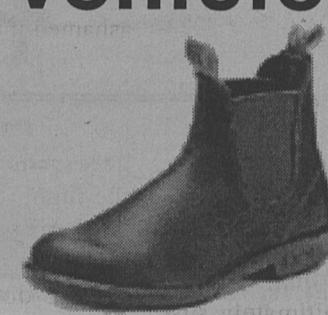


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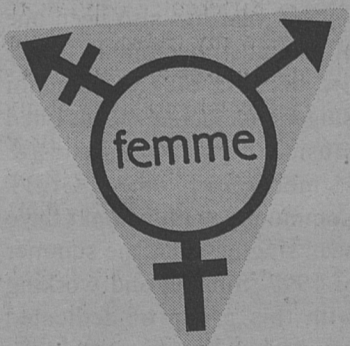
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