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WORDS in MOTION

Eli Clare delivered the powerful opening plenary speech of the University of Vermont's Translating Identity Conference on March 5, 2005. He graciously agreed to provide a shortened version so we could print it here.

Translating. Identity.

I want to start today by picking up those two words; they make me curious: what do they mean side-by-side? The identity part is simple enough, at least on the surface. We talk about identity all the time these days, usually referring to whom we know ourselves to be, each of us as individuals. Identities hinge upon many things: where we make home, the languages we speak, the food we eat, the beliefs we hold dear, the people we love, desire, want to romance, our very bodies themselves, how we feel inside our skin. There are so many ways of naming, telling, our identities, and often we try to squeeze them into single words.

In the trans community, we're in the midst of creating a myriad of words: *transgender, femmeboy, ftm, transwoman, transsexual, genderqueer, trannyboy, mtf, crossdresser, transman, transie, two spirit, femme queen*. I could go on and on; the list is that long. Some of these words we've adopted from doctors and sexologists; others we've found in the dictionary; and still others we have created ourselves or stolen from the bullies and bashers.

Instead of a single word, I want to start like *this*: At eight, nine, ten years old, I took my kite down to the sheep pastures, flew it for hours on end, spinning the line out. I can still feel its tug on my arm.

There is something so futile in trying to name the whole of our gendered desires and realities in single words, even as they

are powerful and necessary. Activist, writer, and this afternoon's keynote presenter Leslie Feinberg writes, "For me, branding individual self-expression as simply masculine or feminine is like asking poets: Do you write in English or Spanish? The question leaves out the possibilities that poetry is woven in Cantonese or Ladino, Swahili or Arabic." (*Trans Liberation*, pg. 9)

For now, let's leave the single words behind. Tell it as a story: once I stood in front of my sister and asked, "Do I look like a boy or a girl?" I couldn't see myself in the mirror. I was a tomboy with a bold and unsteady gait I never grew out of. And you, how will you tell it? Whatever our stories, let's tell them, but not make them simple. Identity doesn't grow in nice neat rows.

I am the guy who gets to take off his shirt at public beaches to warm his bare chest. But listen, I have also been the dyke who had a harsh critique of masculinity, defending women's only space with barbed and unfair words. I am the genderqueer who lived for many years without pronouns, who believed in pride but always cringed at the questions I could never answer gracefully. But listen, I have also been the butch, suspicious of trans people, even as I liked being called "sir." Tomboy, dyke, butch, woman, genderqueer, guy: I have inhabited all these places, claimed each as home, none of them a detour.

And you, where do your breaks, ruptures, contradictions live? I mean to ask this whether you're trans or not, whether you think about your gender every single day or not at all. Identity is a shadblow tree whose branches twist and turn, tangling toward the sun, never symmetrical. Really it's too much to squeeze into any single word.

And so let me continue like this: I used to take my kite down to the sheep pastures, fly it for hours on end, red-tail hawks keening on the updrafts, sun and wind reaching through me. But I wasn't just a tomboy; I was also disabled, queer, white, working-class, English-speaking. Identity is always multiple.

Gender folds into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against race; race tumbles into sexuality; sexuality hangs onto gender; all of it finally piling into our tender, resilient human bodies. There's no real way to separate my genderqueer self from my white self: me, a guy sitting in meetings among women and people of color, aware of my passing privilege as a white man, even as I may hear ma'am on the next street corner. There's no real way to tell it without my disability: the everyday gawking as folks try to figure out what's "wrong" with my slurred speech and trembling hands. Me, the white disabled genderqueer guy: identity is a tangle.

We need to listen hard right into the center of that tangle, which brings me to the other word in that phrase, translating identity. To translate is to shift a story, idea, understanding from one medium, culture, or language to another, words in motion, cracking open ideas and experiences that otherwise would be inaccessible. Translation is about crossing divides and is important because by itself identity isn't enough. Certainly it's important to tell it, to say: I used to fly my kite for hours on end. And still today I can feel its tug on my arm, the beckon of wild blue sky. My gender is that tug, that beckon. But by itself, this story is not enough. There are so many ways to tell, talk, translate our genders. Tell it like a story about trouble, a story about joy. Talk it as a training for health care providers. Translate it as policy, rebellion, a poem sung in the streets. Translation is unfolding.

Tell it, talk it, translate it across divides of power and discrimination. Here at UVM we're working hard to make campus a friendly place for trans people, to