

Chapter 8: Revelations

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

During the Choir season of 1994-95, we were working on a four-chorus, three-city concert tour, with groups from Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. The concert, "Under One Sky," was the most ambitious project the Choir had undertaken to date. Liza was the overall coordinator of the event. I was coordinating the housing for the other choruses when they visited Portland, as well as being publicity coordinator for the Choir that season. It was a productive, busy time. Yet I was increasingly unhappy, because I was so unhappy in my relationship with Judy. I talked with Erin about a lot of things (she is the only person I ever told about my unrequited love of a fellow Choir member), but I never articulated even to Erin the extent of my growing restlessness in my relationship with Judy.

By April of 1995, I didn't have much to say to Judy and was very disillusioned with her. I didn't know why I felt as I did, I just felt she wasn't *there* most of the time. Even so, I was completely unprepared for what happened one night that month. We were attempting to have deep conversations about sex at that point, trying to find a way to be sexual with each other. These attempts were always Judy's idea; left to me, I would have been quite happy to have a loving, companionate relationship completely devoid of sex.

At any rate, one night Judy bolstered her courage and said to me, "I've always felt like a gay man inside, and if I had the money, I'd have an operation tomorrow."

We were lying in bed at the time. It was very late at night. I lay there, absolutely rigid with terror and anxiety. I could not speak, and felt paralyzed. My emotions shut down

and I went numb. I had absolutely no idea what to say. I don't remember how or if I responded, but Judy at one point asked if I'd like a cup of tea. I managed to say no, and she went downstairs and made herself a cup. By the time she came back, I was feigning sleep. She got back into bed quietly and shortly was asleep herself.

But I was not asleep. I spent that night quietly crying my soul out. I lay in bed next to her, sobbing silently. Before dawn, I rose and dressed. I went downstairs and wrote her a note. I don't remember precisely what I said, but do remember one line: "I can't be in a relationship feeling like I'm a poor substitute for a gay man." And I left.

I was in a state of shock, not thinking clearly at all. I wandered all around our neighborhood, passing houses of friends and seeing their cars parked out front. I wanted desperately to connect with sanity again, yet what I was going through was so momentous I could not bring myself to knock on anyone's door. What could I say? "Sorry to wake you up at 6:00 on a Saturday morning, but I'm having a breakdown because my girlfriend just told me she feels like a man inside, can I come in and cry in your arms?"

Eventually I went to a local lesbian-owned café for breakfast. Not that I was hungry, but I felt I needed *some* kind of nourishment, since I wasn't getting any nurturing. I picked up a paper and turned to the classifieds, to look for apartment listings. The enormity of the implications of breaking up began to sink in, and I cried again, silently. I tried to pull my thoughts together, but they would not remain coherent for long.

I realized I would have to go back to our house, to pack up a few things, though I had no idea where I would go then. I waited

until I thought Judy would be gone to teach (Saturday was always her busiest lesson day), then walked slowly back. Approaching our house, I saw Erin and Liza's truck parked out front. I thought Judy had called them, to come over and wait for me to come back while she went off to teach.

It never once occurred to me that on reading my note, Judy would have gone off the deep end herself. Of course she had. She had cancelled all her students for that day, and then called our dearest family, our musketeer allies, who had immediately cancelled their own plans and come right over.

I felt so alone and isolated, I didn't want to see anyone in the extremity of my shock and grief. I snuck onto our back patio, intending to wait there until Erin and Liza left. I still did not realize Judy was inside with them. Then I saw her at the back door window, looking outside. She saw me out on the patio and came rushing out to me. We hugged, and Erin and Liza joined us. At that point, they asked if we were going to talk. We both said yes, and wonderful family that they are, they left us to it, making sure we both knew they were right there for us.

Judy had called them immediately after reading my note, and had told them exactly what had happened. Hence, Erin and Liza were the first to find out about the gender issues that were later to rock all our lives and change us all so profoundly.

The Breakdown

Judy and I finally talked that day, and bit by bit it emerged that she had had a life-long fantasy figure in her mind named Alan Jones. All the times I'd thought she was not fully present, it was *true*. She was engaging in some fantasy dialog or scene with Alan.

She had never talked about her fantasies of being male, and only brought it up because she had finally realized that transition from female to male was possible. She had recently seen an article about Loren Cameron, an FTM photographer. This crystallized her fantasies, and she knew this was the direction she had to go in her life.

During all this, the Choir's "Under One Sky" tour was happening. At the early April concert in Seattle, I had no idea about Alan, or Judy's feelings of being male. By the concert in Portland, in late April, I knew what was going on and was freaked out. By the concert in Vancouver, in early May, the dust had settled a bit. We cared a lot about each other, and this was becoming more apparent as the weeks went by. Yet, the nature of transition is so deep and the changes so profound, I became increasingly terrified as Judy began acting on this life-long feeling.

Judy found a support group for trans people. She began going to therapy. She started moving away from me and redefining her identity, with frightening speed. Our relationship was in total limbo. Judy's gender identity had moved into limbo-land, a phase that I now understand is the beginning of transition. At the time, however, all I knew is that all *my* identities were suddenly insecure.

In the moment, the one that rocked me most was our relationship. In addition, however, I found it impossible to concentrate on work. I had to give up my typesetting business. Then I lost my companion, as Judy moved out. A Choir member had just bought a house in NE Portland and was looking for a roommate to help her with the mortgage. Judy moved in with Lucy, ostensibly only for awhile, to gain some perspective and have the space to

create this new identity "Alan."

I also "lost" the Choir, as the ending of the "Under One Sky" tour was the end of the Choir's season and the beginning of summer break. Choir would not be meeting again until mid-September. I had never needed my "family" more, or the structure that rehearsals provided for me, and suddenly both were missing.

For historical accuracy, I have used female pronouns for Judy/Alan, to this point in my narrative, but I am now about to switch. When Judy became Alan, the pronouns switched also. While this was very difficult for me at the time, I cannot now think of Alan and use female pronouns. There remains a sadness in my heart, for in accepting Alan as male, I had to let go of Judy. Essentially, when I think of Judy, it's as if my partner of seven years had died. I do not equate Judy and Alan. I don't believe it's true of a transsexual that they remain "the same person only in a different body, with a new name and a different pronoun," as I've heard some describe it. Transition involves such a profound change, the person on the other side is not the same at all as they were previously.

The Epiphany

Though I'd kept a journal religiously during my twenties, I had given it up after becoming involved with Judy. Now, I tried journaling again, but stopped after only a week or so. The events of that time were so painful for me, writing was no salvation, but the equivalent of salt in a deep wound. The following is the only writing I did during that time period. I re-read this journal occasionally, to keep myself humble and to acknowledge the incredible journey I've taken.

I try not to laugh at the bitter irony of the

name of this journal. "A Woman's Journal" indeed. I wonder if this means Judy couldn't use it. Actually, Judy could. It's Alan who would hesitate.

I can't quite shake the feeling this whole thing is merely sick, and that I'm going to lose big-time out of it.

I used to think life was hard. (And it was) The pain of unrequited love. The constant wondering about attraction – is she, isn't she? I handled it in stride when Therese told me she was bisexual. I will never fall in love with a man, but I can see the attraction (at least, with some men!).

But all previous pain and especially doubts pale compared to the concept of Judy as transgendered.

I have a strong aversion to calling her Alan because I know to her it's an affirmation of maleness in herself.

And I want no part of being involved with someone who isn't glad to be a woman. That's it, in a nutshell. How can I be in a happy life-partnership with someone who'd rather be a man? I'm a dyke!!!

I should know by now that my first reactions are usually true and right. My first reaction was, "Let me out of here!" I calmed down from that, but the more time passes and the more I learn, the more that reaction returns.

I'm rather glad for the down time, the alone space, for centering. Leaving Judy would be incredibly painful. But she's becoming Alan, and that person, I think I can leave easily. Particularly since I think the next step will be changing pronouns to "he." I know Judy; she'll never be satisfied until she's gone as far as all her resources (financial and emotional) will permit. Which means just shy of surgery. I don't want to be involved with a man!

She says, "This is who I've always been, I'm the same person." But all that means to me is that there was a side of her she kept really well-hidden.

I don't know how far I can go toward

overcoming my socialization. Men are men, women are women. Period. I feel uneasy around transsexuals. I don't understand them. I am very well aware that this is the exact reaction homophobes have to gays and lesbians. I know in time I will come to accept Lily, or Lee, and say, "That's just their way." The question is, do I want to be in a life-partnership with someone I can't understand on such a fundamental level? I can see that I could come to an acceptance of transgenderism. But understanding deep enough to sustain a lover relationship requires an empathy, a sharing of feeling, that I will never have.

I wish to god Judy had had the courage to face these fantasies at their initial appearance. None of this would be happening if she had. She's going to lose me. And her friends. Is it really worth it? I guess it is, to her, because she's doing it.

I wish I believed this was all going to be taken care of by her name change. But I truly see that as the first step, not the end of anything. When I think of our past life together, it brings tears to think how much we've shared, knowing that even if miraculously our relationship continues it will never be the same. I don't trust that I will ever know my lover again, and that makes me insecure. And this process is so deep, so overdue acknowledgment, that I don't trust it will ever end. That even if we stay together, she'll wake up one morning and announce she's ready to take hormones. Pass as a man.

Certain things about Judy do fall into place for me. Like why she had so few women lovers before me. I thought she was shy, happy alone, waiting rather than looking. Philosophical about it; if it happens, fine, kind of attitude. Now I see there was more to it. How did I manage to get past all those fantasies long enough to have an impact?

Whatever the hell kharmic debt brought all this on me rather than someone else, I hope I'm handling it well enough to never have to face this

hell again.

As is clear from this writing, I had not yet realized the implications of Alan's revelation to my own identity. I was still trying to fit my round self into a square hole. Yet deep down, I knew that the intensity of my reaction to this situation was not normal for me. I'd been through break-ups before, and they had never affected me like *this*. I entered therapy, for the first time in my life, because I somehow knew I was not going to be able to survive this without professional help. Because I knew nothing about therapy, I called Phoenix Rising, a local gay/lesbian mental health agency I'd heard of, and made an appointment with the first therapist who had an opening.

My memories of this time period are quite hazy, but there are a few moments that stand out with crystal clarity. One took place on a hot summer afternoon in July while I was walking around downtown Portland. I had been in therapy for a few weeks at this point, with a woman who had embraced cognitive behavioral techniques with a vengeance. She was concerned about my depression, which was quite severe, and was giving me cognitive therapy tools to challenge negative thoughts as they arose.

That day, I applied these techniques in a new way, stepping back from Alan's transition to ask from the perspective of an outsider, or one approaching the idea as an intellectual curiosity, "What *would* it be like to wander around the world male instead of female?" Envisioning this new role, I had a sudden feeling of excitement, almost euphoria, that led me finally, after 39 years female, to go that monumental further step and ask the question –

"What *would* it feel like for **ME** to wander around the world male instead of female?"

I don't know about other people's epiphanies, but for me, this simple question changed *everything*. It was not just a change in my thoughts or beliefs, it was a change in the processes underpinning my thoughts and beliefs. In asking that question seriously, I immediately and permanently shed the negative self-esteem that had colored my self-concept all my life. New revelations came fast – I realized that perhaps I hated going into women's bathrooms simply because I didn't feel I belonged there, not because I had high levels of internalized sexism. Perhaps I was too self-conscious to enjoy sex because I felt so bad about my female body, not because I had high levels of internalized homophobia.

I clearly remember experiencing a wonderful high feeling of rightness – for about three minutes. Then the implications of my conclusions hit me like a ton of bricks and I went into a tailspin. The logical conclusion of this revelation was that I would be much happier with life living as a guy than as a lesbian. From there, it wasn't long before the thought surfaced, "My God, this means leaving the Choir." The tailspin was the result of knowing that this final stripping away of my denial was going to lead me away from the Choir forever, a thought so painful I didn't know if I could survive it.

The enormity of change sank in. Erin and Liza. All the friends I'd accumulated through nearly 20 years in Portland. My family of choice – would these lesbians remain my family, and would I retain my place as family to them? My voice – I would lose my fine alto singing voice, I would lose my place in the Choir. I would lose my place as an alto in Bridges Vocal Ensemble, a mixed chorus I'd helped create in 1990. I remember wailing in despair, "Why does it have to be my *voice*?

Why couldn't I have been a tuba player?"

All I could focus on was what I would lose. I could not clearly envision what I would gain. Unlike Alan, I'd never had conscious fantasies about being male. I had no pre-created identity to step into. Now, I not only had no business, no job, no chorus for the summer, no companion, no Judy – I had no "Nancy" either. All my identities had been stripped from me, and I sank. The bedrock of my life had turned to quicksand.

Naturally, I took this revelation to my next therapy appointment. Because I knew nothing about therapy, I did not realize that I had a bad therapist. I had thought from her age (mid-40s) that she was experienced. I didn't know then that therapy is often a second career for folks, and that many therapists don't embark on this career until mid-life. I also did not know that an experienced therapist, particularly a good one, is not likely to be working for a non-profit agency, as the pay is not very good. When I told Margaret about my revelation, she immediately tried to convince me that since I had not had these fantasies consciously all my life, I did not fit the official criteria for "gender identity disorder" (as it is called in the mental health profession) and therefore that couldn't be it.

Her belief was, I was trying to convince myself I was really male in the hope that if I transitioned also, Alan and I would remain partners, since he was identifying as a gay man. Now, I was very unsure of anything anymore, but even in the midst of this major breakdown, I knew Margaret was wrong about this. I wasn't sure what or who I was anymore, but Margaret's interpretation didn't feel right at all. The thought of remaining with Alan had not even occurred to me when I had my revelation or experienced the resulting tailspin. I tried to

tell her this, and she recommended I read a book called *Goddesses in Every Woman*.

Clearly, she thought I was a maladjusted lesbian. She gave no credence to the power of my epiphany, or to the fact that the only positive thoughts I'd had recently were when I visualized myself moving through the world male. I also thought it quite significant that thoughts of Alan had not even entered into my vision of myself as male. This vision had to do with me, alone in the world and happy in an identity for the first time in my life, not to do with myself in relation to anyone else. I hadn't gotten that far yet!

Despite my reservations, I bought the book *Goddesses in Every Woman*, and read about two paragraphs before putting it aside with the thought, "This is not it." I gave it to a lesbian friend who had recently broken up with a lover and was having self-doubts.

It was a shock to me that my therapist discounted my revelation so thoroughly, and I began to believe therapy was not going to help me. I grew increasingly desperate for peace, sanity, and some semblance of identity. When Alan moved out, I had taken in boarders to pay the mortgage. Living with strangers in the house that had once been our home was too much for me, and after about a month of this existence I asked Alan if we could trade places. He agreed, and I moved out the same day he moved back in. I knew even then that I would never live in our beautiful home again, and I was saddened by the thought.

I saw more clearly than Alan did that our relationship was over, and when I told him how sad I was because I knew I'd never live in our home again, he was very taken aback by the observation. But I knew I had to move out. I was not sleeping, and knew I stood no chance at all of moving forward in any

direction as long as I remained in that house. So in the late summer of 1995, I moved in with Lucy, a fellow first alto in the Portland Lesbian Choir, and Alan moved back into "our house."

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