

Dual Citizenship

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

"She's a witch" was usually the equivalent of a death sentence, back in Salem, Massachusetts of the 1600's, whether the accusation was true or not. In the McCarthy era of the 1950's, "communist" could easily ruin a person's life, whether true or not. "Dyke" or "faggot" were deadly insults in the 1960's, and the mere rumor of either, usually meant losing a job.

Throughout history, people have hurled accusations at each other, sometimes with foundation and other times through repeating delicious gossip without the least idea whether the accusation was true. All too seldom have people really stopped to consider *why* their accusation carries such deadly weight. So what if a woman in seventeenth century Massachusetts prescribed herbs that healed better than the village physician could? So what if she was independent and cared little for the opinion of her male neighbors? So what if she expressed no interest in marriage?

So what if an insurance salesman belonged to the Communist Party and attended meetings by night? So what if a librarian believed in a socialist welfare state rather than a capitalist economy? So what if an attorney joined the American Civil Liberties Union, believing passionately in the rights of the individual to worship freely?

So what if a woman prefers to make her home with another woman, and openly proclaims her choice of mate? So what if a man wishes to marry another man, and hangs a rainbow flag from his porch in late June every year?

As the centuries have passed, the penalty for being different in our society has gradually lessened from certain death to probable job loss to possible social discomfort (with occasional random violence thrown in). As society has loosened its need to control the individual from a stranglehold to the level of open disapproval of "deviance," the polarization between conservative and progressive individuals has widened. Progressive individuals feel freer to explore further the realm of human consciousness, and the possibilities of human potential. Conservatives, alarmed, dig in their heels in an attempt to slow the rate of social change, and reverse it whenever possible.

Though an unpopular opinion among progressives, I believe conservatives perform a vital function in our society. There is a saying that God invented time to prevent everything from happening at once. My feeling is, God invented conservatives to prevent everything from *changing* at once. It's not such a bad idea for a freight train to have brakes as well as a throttle, as long as the throttle is still moving the train forward. A balance between conservatism and progressive forward motion is ideal.

As befits our dualistic culture, many conservatives and progressives alike proudly adopt whichever label fits them best, and deny that most of us have elements of both in us. Perhaps like sexual orientation, there is a Kinsey scale of politics, with 0 being entirely conservative and 6 being entirely progressive – most people would fall somewhere in the center, between 1 and 5. And like sexual orientation, most people deny that this makes them bi-political. Yet even the most progressive, open-minded folks have their limitations and can stumble across blind spots, pockets of conservatism that may appall them to discover in themselves. Such is sometimes the response folks have to trans people who come out to them. I recently attended an FTM conference and met a transman and his wife (a biofemale). I'll call them Mark and Julie. Mark had transitioned some years prior to their marriage, and Julie had never known him as a female. She identifies as a heterosexual woman, and it took her some time to wrap her mind around the idea of being involved with an FTM. They'd been married several years prior to this conference, the first trans event either had ever attended.

Mark and I had developed an e-mail correspondence some months prior to the conference, and looked forward to meeting and discussing trans issues. I ran into him and Julie one morning in the lobby of our hotel, and he invited me to have breakfast with them. As we talked and ate, I became gradually aware that Julie was giving me "the look," one unfortunately familiar to most trans people. The look says: "I really wonder how you look without your clothes on. I really wonder what you used to look like as a female. Even though I can't picture you as female, I still know you used to be, and that is affecting my ability to treat you as fully human. And I really hope you can't read my mind at this moment, but I think I'm hiding my feelings really well as I talk to you."

FTM conferences are one of the few places in this world where I expect I *won't* encounter "the look," which makes it all the more tiresome that I did. It's a reminder to me that everyone has blind spots, pockets of leftover socialization, that affect how we treat some particular kind of marginalized person. Most of us (with the exception of the David Duke's of the world) feel shame when we trip over a blind spot in ourselves, and try to deny its existence, often keeping ourselves oblivious to its presence. However, when we do that, we deny ourselves the opportunity to shed light into that blind spot and perhaps begin the process of changing the unwanted attitude in ourselves. Perpetuation of our blind spots merely feeds into the conservative agenda of holding back progressive attitudes and values. Every time I find myself shutting off my feelings of discomfort around someone, I check for blind spots in my field of vision.

I used to have a huge blind spot about transsexuals. I had a large degree of gender dissonance, and didn't want to face it. So when confronted with the presence of a transsexual, I managed to turn my extremely personal discomfort into a political feeling of disapproval. I was only aware of the existence of MTFs, managing to completely ignore that transitioning FTM was possible. My disapproval was around MTFs claiming

the right to be in women-only space. I did not believe anyone socialized male could possibly be a woman. So I said. However, had I shone a light on that blind spot, I would have seen an extreme discomfort with my own gender identity as a woman, and would have realized the envy I felt for these transwomen who had courageously faced their own gender dissonance and done something about it. And I would have felt ashamed of my own lack of courage to face my gender head-on, as they had done.

Now, four years after starting hormones, I have come full circle back to my female socialization. I went through a phase of giddy excitement at having a fully male presentation in the world, and then realized that I preferred a lesbian politic of egalitarian relationship and fairness, to the patriarchal politic of competition and stoicism. Yet I still prefer living in a male body. I can't claim either female *or* male as my gender identity, but some combination of both.

I live in a culture that tries to force me to check "Male" or "Female" on any form I fill out, and has no option for "Other" or "Both." There is no option of dual citizenship, but I'd claim it if there were. I move freely between genders, able to interact in all-male or all-female groups. In previous generations, expressing this attitude would have either gotten me killed or locked up in a psych ward, unemployable and diagnosed with some form of identity disorder. I need to maintain this historical perspective, bearing always in mind how far our culture has come from that seventeenth century period of crazed witch burnings. This keeps me sane, allowing me to hope for a future when an FTM's wife will not give another FTM "the look," a future where generic forms may have more boxes than "Male" or "Female" – or, no box at all. Living outside the box gives me what I think of as "dual citizenship," but it's only dual while I live in a dualistic culture. I would rather have simply, "citizenship."

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