

THE PARADOX OF FEMINISM  
*by Reid Vanderburgh, MA*

My brother-in-law laments for the 1950s, wanting a return to the days when “men were men and women were women and everyone knew where they stood.” Despite our general disagreement on nearly every topic possible, paradoxically, I know that life would be much easier for post-transition transsexuals if gender roles were still as narrowly-defined and mutually exclusive as they were in the 1950s.

Many of my clients have been in transition long enough to realize that the dividing line between male and female gender roles in 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. culture is “mushy.” What it means to “act like a man” has shifted over time, and is not the same across all situations. The fluidity of the male gender role, however, is a pale echo of the expansion that has taken place within the *female* gender role.

In that decade my brother-in-law so reveres, the socially-acceptable choices available for women in the workplace were (a) secretarial, (b) nursing, (c) teaching, or (d) social work. Anything beyond these occupations was part of “a man’s world,” and women had to fight to gain entrée. Further, women were expected to work for a living only for the length of time it took them to find a husband to support them. The work world was viewed as the place where a woman could find a husband, if she had not already done so in college. This left lesbians in a bit of a quandary, as the longer they worked without finding a husband, the more likely their co-workers and employers would realize they were lesbians, thus putting their livelihoods at grave risk. Lesbians and gay men were usually summarily fired if there was the least suspicion of homosexuality, which was viewed as rendering the person in question inherently emotionally unstable, and therefore an undesirable employee.

Note the passive voice in some of my sentence construction: “Women were expected...” and “the work world was viewed...” By whom? Normally I prefer the active voice that assigns responsibility for a point of view. But how can I assign responsibility for a cultural norm? “Women were expected...” as part of their socialization, as part of their gender role, to look for a man to take care of them. (It would be more accurate to rewrite the phrase to read “White middle class women were expected...” The expectations and norms among women of color, and/or working class women, were different, as color and class barriers were much less permeable in the 1950s than they are today. Survival, holding the hope for one’s children to be able to advance, was one of the primary driving forces among non-white, non-middle class women.)

On the other side of the equation, “men were expected...” to get a good, stable job and then look for the woman who would mother their children and take care of the family and home front, while the man went off to work every day to bring home the paycheck. The linear path for a man was to get his career established, then look for a wife. If a man found “the girl of his dreams” before his career was established, he’d best be prepared for an indeterminate period of engagement, until his future was financially secure. To get married *without* that assurance of financial security “was viewed” as irresponsible, because one of the male gender role expectations was the ability to provide for a family.

In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, often credited with catalyzing the modern feminist movement. Had she been speaking only for herself, how influential would her book have been? Had most women been content with the scope of their gender role, would *The Feminine Mystique* have started a quiet (at least at first!) revolution? How could such a book start a revolution if its contents didn't give voice to the silent frustrations of millions of women?

The 1960s was a magical time, a kind of "social Renaissance" in the United States. Historians often view the European Renaissance with amazement, that such geniuses lived at much the same time, influencing the course of history through the cultural influence they exerted during their lifetimes. I view the 1960s similarly – Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy, Angela Davis... and the musicians of that decade, right there, recording what they saw for generations hence. The list of musicians in attendance at Woodstock reads like a *Who's Who in American Music* in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The 1960s was certainly the most tumultuous decade I've lived through. Women's rights, gay rights, African American civil rights. These various revolutionary forces changed the course of U.S. social norms toward the right of individual self-determination, with no proscribed roles and no limiting parameters. Though the conservative backlash of the 1980s curbed the expansion, and attempted to provide proscription and parameters once again, the genie was out of the bottle. Women would not be limited to those four occupations (secretary, teacher, nurse, social worker) again. Too many had experienced the freedoms of the 1960s.

Too many women also remembered their (or their mother's) experience of post-World War II U.S. culture – having had good jobs, the experience of being able to earn their own way, during the war, only to be summarily fired once the soldiers came home and needed jobs themselves. The female role had been severely stunted at that time, and feminists of the 1960s were *not* going to allow that to happen to women again. The 1950s resulted from the soldiers' return after WWII. The modern feminist movement worked to assure that subsequent decades would not lead to a similar erosion of the progress achieved in the 1960s.

In the years since, young women have come to take for granted that any occupation is open to them if they work hard enough. Those in traditionally male fields still experience a certain amount of sexism and a "glass ceiling," but believe that hard work will do the trick. What has changed is the degree to which sexism is socially acceptable, which affects male behavior. Sexism now is more covert, and thus harder to quantify, than it was in the 1950s. It is now illegal to discriminate in the workplace based on sex, which of course doesn't make the discrimination go away – rather, it is driven underground. Over time, however, as women prove themselves in various occupations, sexism itself will fade away and become anachronistic. A long term process, to be sure, but a process that has nevertheless been underway for several decades.

It would seem that the expansion of the female gender role would be a helpful thing to those in transition, not a hindrance, but such is not the case. It is easier to learn a new gender role if the role is clearly defined for you, and the narrower the role is, the more easily one can determine its parameters. What has happened in U.S. culture, however, is not merely a broadening of the scope of the female gender role. More conservative men and women still define a woman's role as it existed in the 1950s – family first, husband first, only acceptable career: child-bearing and

child-rearing. Thus, there is considerable cultural disagreement over the nature and scope of the female gender role, with a far broader range of acceptable options available to those whose world view is more progressive.

A male-to-female person who has always lived a conservative life, who embraces conservative values, will find those values challenged as she allows herself to adopt the female gender role. This role may very well chafe when adopted by one who has always had the “top dog” male role. More progressive male-to-female people find themselves in a bewildering world of choice and opportunity. The male gender role has not expanded at the same dizzying rate – women can wear pants much more freely than they could 40 years ago, yet men are still not permitted to wear dresses with such impunity. A man who cries easily, who shows emotional connection to others easily, who communicates his feelings easily, is still viewed as “weak” in some way, by nearly all men and by many women as well. The anachronistic “rugged individualistic” Marlboro® man is still the most admired archetype of many American men. (Ironically, the original Marlboro® man was gay.)

While there are a few men daring to enter traditionally-female occupations (secretary, nurse), many encounter the attitude that they must be gay; male elementary school teachers are often viewed with the suspicion that they must be pedophiles. The general view seems to be, “Why else would a man choose to teach young children?” I remember hearing a report on NPR last year about a group of stay-at-home dads who had formed their own support group (support as in sharing various duties) because they had felt so unwelcome among the stay-at-home moms. However, it is progress that men are in these occupations at all, facing their own version of sexism –it is the participation that will eventually effect change.

Female-to-male persons find it difficult to know how to treat women who are unknown to them. “Do I hold the door? Do all women expect this?” What he finds is that some women are almost offended if he holds the door, while others are definitely offended if he does not. If he is attracted to women, he finds himself navigating a minefield – should he automatically pay for dinner or drinks, is “Dutch treat” the norm, or not, or does it depend on the situation? Dave Barry has made millions writing about the dilemma of the straight American male.

It’s hard for MTF folks to learn what it means to be a woman, because the permutations and possibilities have so expanded in recent decades. Equally, it’s difficult for FTM folks to learn how to interact with women because the boundaries between the genders have become more fluid. As my brother-in-law laments, it was easier when “men were men, women were women, and that was that.” Those who transition encounter a world of conflicting roles and a maze of rules that is a source of constant confusion. Certainly, the gender roles they were born to were fraught with the same types of confusion. However, early socialization results in knowing what the sources of confusion are, what the various boundaries and paradoxes are, for the birth gender role.

Learning a new set of inconsistencies, shifting boundaries, and fluid rules, is very difficult as an adult. This is particularly true since folks who are fairly early in transition also deal with issues of being unsure how they are seen by others. This makes it virtually impossible to ask questions. An apt analogy is that of a spy, dropped behind enemy lines. The culture is completely different, and the spy cannot ask *any* questions about what is appropriate and what isn’t. It is far

too probable that one day, she will ask a question that will cause others to look at her and say, "Why don't you know that? You should know that automatically. Who are you, anyway? You're not one of us." All she can do is observe what others do and say, and try to emulate them to the best of her ability. But the hyper-vigilance, the necessity of constantly watching her actions, takes its toll. Such is the case with the post-transition individual, especially in a culture with its gender norms in flux. It is impossible to know with absolute certainty whether a particular behavior, attitude or word choice is "appropriate," and this can have a somewhat paralyzing effect on trans people as they navigate their way through early transition.

Over time (probably best measured in years, rather than months), the trans person settles into the new gender role and comes to better understand the parameters that suit them best. But the learning process is arduous, and best undertaken with mentors – biofemale mentors for the MTF person, biomale for the FTM. If these mentors share the same sexual orientation as the trans person, all the better. In this instance, it does little good for MTFs to turn to each other for information – they are all on the same learning curve. It is the biofemales who are best suited to help out with the resocialization process. The reverse applies to FTMs – it is the biomale mentor who can provide invaluable support and information during their learning process. Hence, coming out to a few key people post-transition can provide an invaluable source of support for the post-transition trans person, even if their primary life goal is to live "stealth," without disclosing their birth gender to new people they meet once they've transitioned.

While the rigid, narrow gender roles of the 1950s were probably easier for trans people of that era to learn, it is the fluidity available now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that will eventually result in greater acceptance of trans identities than has ever been available in western culture. Over time, perhaps trans people won't feel they must live "stealth" in order to be happy, productive members of society. I am hopeful that a phrase from 1980s GLB culture will become appropriate for future trans people: "Closets are for clothes."

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