

LIVING LA VIDA MEDIA

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

I was 39 years old, living as a lesbian, when I first realized I'd probably be happier living as a guy. I did not take kindly to this realization, for several reasons. First, I had quite a life built up in the Portland (Oregon) lesbian community. I was a founding member of nine years' standing of the Portland Lesbian Choir, and leaving that group was not on my horizon.

Second, I had a family of choice with whom my bonds were stronger than those with my biological family. All were lesbians. All were fellow Choir members, or members of my mixed chorus, Bridges Vocal Ensemble. Or members of both. Queer folks find family as we are able, and often the bonds forged through living in a hostile society are stronger than the bonds of blood connection. I was scared of my realization – if I became a man, would I lose my family of choice?

Finally, I had a negative reaction to the idea of being trans because I had absorbed the mainstream belief that being trans was weird, sick and perverted. Whenever I did see someone obviously trans, I felt uneasy and off-balance, as if I was in the presence of someone who was psychotic, or not fully human. I had some vague equation of “transsexual” and “drag queen” as synonymous, which of course had made it impossible for me to recognize myself as a transsexual earlier in my life. I've loathed feminine clothing for as long as I can remember, which is hardly the attitude of a drag queen!

I'd never had conscious fantasies about being male. I had just never felt completely at home in my skin as a female, causing a low-grade anxiety and depression that was growing steadily as I aged. I hated women's bathrooms. I did not like introducing myself to others, as my former name was highly feminine. I avoided describing myself as a lesbian, and felt vaguely uncomfortable referring to myself as a woman. I had never visited an ob/gyn in my life. I was full of contradictions and felt an enigma to myself – not an easy life for a Virgo.

I would probably still be living in denial had my then-partner not come out to me in the spring of 1995, telling me one night, “I've always felt like a man inside.” This effectively held a mirror to my soul. I could no longer ignore what I saw there, but was not prepared to face it. The effect was rather like a badly-done substance abuse intervention. Because of the negative attitudes I'd internalized about what it meant to be trans, I had a difficult time feeling okay about the concept of going through female-to-male transition.

Then one day a bisexual friend said to me, with some envy in her voice, “What a gift, to be able to live as both sexes in one lifetime.” This one phrase reframed the experience for me, for the first time putting a positive spin on the concept of being trans. Nowhere else had I encountered a positive interpretation of what it might mean to be trans. I moved forward with a great deal more confidence and excitement at the possibilities inherent in the unexpected opportunity life had presented me.

I postponed my physical transition for nearly two years, waiting for the Portland Lesbian Choir to record its first CD. I spent those two years in gender limbo-land, being seen primarily as male in my undergrad classes at Portland State University (unless I opened my mouth to speak), being seen as in transition at work, and being seen as a lesbian during Choir rehearsals. I felt the split keenly, never being able to quite integrate these various aspects of my life into one cohesive whole, despite the fact that I came out to everyone who was important to me. Transition cannot be done in the closet.

Once I began hormones and had top surgery, life became much simpler, as my former lesbian life faded away gradually. However, what I found is that I did not become more male in my outlook on life. I became fully male in appearance, while retaining many of the values I'd learned in the lesbian community. I did not feel much more comfortable calling myself a man than I had calling myself a woman, or a lesbian, though I felt fine calling myself a guy and definitely felt more comfortable in my own skin. I did not lose my lesbian family of choice, and found those friendships have retained their original intimacy. If anything, they are deeper than ever, as I am more centered and thus more capable of truly intimate relationships.

I gradually came to realize that I had not transitioned from female to male. I had transitioned from female to not-female. In the ensuing years, I have come to agree with Kate Bornstein, a transwoman writer and performer, who stated in her book *Gender Outlaw*, "I know I'm not a man – about that much I'm very clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman, either."

I wasn't raised to be a man. I did not absorb male socialization. I did not have testosterone dominant in my body, with the resulting imperious sex drive, until I was 41 years old. I have never thought of women as other than my equal, and don't believe I can. I don't have any of the traditional attitudes considered male in this society. While I am *capable* of having a monotone discussion about sports, I'd *rather* have a passionate conversation about life.

I've become increasingly convinced, both through personal experience and through conversations with other trans people, that it's not really possible to transition fully from one sex to another. Biomen (men who were born male) see me as a man, though they quickly come to realize there's something not quite man-like about me. Many assume this must mean I'm gay (which I am, but that's beside the point!) as the thought never enters their minds that perhaps I wasn't always male. Those biomen who know I'm trans sometimes utilize me as a resource for understanding women's ways of seeing the world, though I have always been treated respectfully by these men.

Biowomen see me as a man, though they quickly come to realize there's something not quite man-like about me. Women, however, tend to feel completely comfortable with me in a way many straight biomen do not – they subconsciously recognize me as "one of them," though not in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable. It does not feel as if they are seeing me as a woman. Rather, they seem to recognize me as a safety zone, a refuge from other men, of whom they feel they must be wary. I've had a number of biowomen comment with surprise on how comfortable they feel with me. Many of them, unaware that I'm trans, assume this must mean I'm gay. Because the mainstream

view still equates “drag queen” and “transsexual,” I’ve never met a bioman or biowoman yet who has figured out on their own that I was born female.

Now, I feel I’m neither man nor woman, though the limitations of English force me to choose sides, if only so I may have terminology with which to describe myself. So, I’m a guy, much more comfortable with male pronouns than female, but not really feeling like “a man.” I’m living *la vida media* – life in the middle. I have not crossed the bridge from “female” on one side, over an immeasurable chasm, to become “male” on the other side. Rather, I have *become* the bridge.

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