

David Johnsrud: Not Going Away

My experience growing up with gender dysphoria is, I am sure, very similar to others of my generation. We did not talk about it, however. We were coerced into clothing that was wrong, had our mannerisms corrected, were dissuaded from engaging in play activities deemed inappropriate for us, etc.

My first recollection of being aware of this incongruence is also my first memory, or fragments of a memory. I was being posed for a photographer in July 1969, so I was not quite two years old. I was wearing a red velvet dress and it felt wrong. I kept looking down at it. When I finally looked up, the photographer got the picture. My mother mentioned many times over the years that I was uncooperative with the activity; I wouldn't pose with the toy phone the way I was supposed to.

I recently purged my family's collection of 99% of pictures of me as a child. They depict me in inappropriate clothing with hair accoutrements that I resisted, even though my parents were fairly strict. Contradicting them or showing any disrespect at all was forbidden and this line was not crossed without consequence. However, I could not make myself tolerate the narrow definition of how I was to wear and display my gender, let alone embrace it, as my mother would have much preferred.

When I was seventeen I was outed to my parents as lesbian by a well-meaning family friend. (That wasn't quite right but it was good enough for twenty-seven years.)

What occurred next was a decade plus of intense family struggle. I moved out due to the conflict while I was still a teen and my mother requested that I not remain in their town, for fear of repercussions to my father's professional reputation. This was not a problem. I did not like their town and much preferred the larger metropolitan area within close proximity, where I correctly figured I would have better opportunities as an LGBT person. I did, however, lose one job for not conforming to expectations associated with my assigned gender. My parents were furious with me for testing their liberal values. They were certain that I was making choices to annoy them.

When I was nineteen years old and in college, I was in counseling to process all that had happened with my family over my identity as an LGBT person. I was walking back to my dorm when the thought hit me, clear as day, that my problems did not stem from being a lesbian. "Your problem is that you're transgender." I stopped walking. I looked at the ground and thought about all I was going through at the time. I had passive suicidal ideation and thought many times about "falling" from

heights. I was once pulled back from crossing the street in front of a bus caroming through the intersection. I didn't want to die as much as I wanted to be free of so much pain. I thought of all this and said out loud to myself, "NO!" I did not believe I could handle the repercussions of a yet more shocking disclosure. I retreated from that thought back into a lesbian identity, where I took refuge with countless other transmen for another twenty-five years. Being a lesbian would have to be good enough, and it would also be bad enough.

I had an intricate symphony of mental somersaults and thought-rearranging I would engage whenever the thought popped up again, as it often did over the decades. When the thought of being transgender percolated all the way to my frontal lobes, I would gently put it back in its cage by convincing myself that treatment would not be accessible to me, that to change one's sex and name one must be transgender and I couldn't possibly qualify, that I did not want to be dependent on pharmaceuticals for the rest of my life, that I would lose friends who felt I had betrayed them, etc. We were not using the term "gender nonbinary" at that time, but I did start referring to myself as "gender nebulous".

In 2009, when I was forty-two, I was working with an elder transman patient. He told me about his transition in the 1960s. He told me that transitioning was the best decision he had ever made, even though doing so in the 1960s was a much more socially isolating process than it is now. I went home and read the paper and a story about Chaz Bono caught my eye. He was in the process of transitioning, having started taking testosterone several months before. This held a certain irony for me, as my mother used to want me to take note of Chastity Bono when she appeared sometimes on his parent's variety show in the early 1970s. He is slightly younger than I am, and always appeared on the show in long dresses made of chiffon, tulle, and lace. My mother hoped that I would want to emulate the child of literal rock stars. (It didn't take.)

But what DID take was Chaz's comment about his decision to transition, which is that it was "the best decision [he had] ever made". Twice in one day. I got up to brush my teeth and while doing so, I let some thoughts roll around a little in my head, where I would usually engage my retinue of logical gymnastics to convince myself that transition wasn't for me. I was forty-two years old. I could very easily live another forty-two years and then some. I was very uncomfortable in my body, with my name, with feminine pronouns, and all of it. This had always been the case. My trying to will away my realization that I was transgender when I was nineteen years of age did not work. It just wasn't going away. I realized that I was in very real

danger of going to my grave wondering what it would have been like to have been comfortable in my own skin. I had tried. Hard. For as many years as I was aware I had a gender I hated the one I was given. Not because I hate women in general; I truly do not. I just am not a woman and I decided to no longer continue my unsatisfactory existence in the poor fit I was enduring. Besides, the amount of alcohol it took to keep myself cajoled into keeping this charade up was increasing and that road never goes anywhere good.

It was another three months until I went to a meeting in my city for transgender men and said my actual name aloud for the first time. I met Sister Luisa Derouen there, as well, and we started a dialogue then that continues to this day. She had been ministering among the transgender community for many years by then. She was instrumental during my transition and remains a dear friend. I have been out as a transman now for ten years, and on testosterone for nine years. I have changed my name and all my documents and have had several surgeries. My appearance is now completely different from how it was before I started. Also, and very significantly, my mental health is far better than it ever has been. This is undoubtedly the best decision I have ever made. I regret daily not beginning the process of claiming my true identity when I was nineteen and finally realized what all my angst was about.

Since transition, I have been able to find and integrate parts of myself that I could not previously reconcile, since nothing about the way I knew myself made sense. I could not trust any of my self-perceptions, and therefore could not believe what I saw or felt. I have realized lately that before I started transition, I could not even have declared with authority things that I *liked*, since I knew nothing of myself.

If I could do it all over again, I would have done this so many years ago. It just didn't go away. But slowly, as I transitioned and underwent my surgeries, the anguish did go away. I no longer hate to see myself in a mirror, no longer hate the sound of my voice. I feel like myself for the first time in my life. I am now fifty-two years of age and I intend to live a long, healthy, and fulfilled life, now that I can.