

The Transgender Alternative

by Holly Boswell

When a transsexual sister of mine observed that “so many of us simply stall out and fail to achieve our goal of sex reassignment surgery,” I felt compelled to question her premise: “Maybe a lot of these people who apparently stall out have found a more comfortable and appropriate middle ground. Maybe there aren’t so many transsexual people after all.” Crossdressers may also have a sense of this, yet be equally unsure of this middle ground.

The middle ground I am referring to is transgenderism. I realize this term (heretofore vague) also encompasses the entire spectrum: crossdresser to transsexual person. But for the purpose of this article—and for what I hope will be a continuing dialogue—I shall attempt to define transgender as a viable option between crossdresser and transsexual person, which also happens to have a firm foundation in the ancient tradition of androgyny. (All my references will address the male-to-female orientation).

The prefix “trans-” means: across, beyond, through, or so as to change. Words like transition, transformation, transparent, transpersonal, transcend—all are relevant to transvestism (cross-dressing), transgenderism (identifying oneself across gender lines), and transsexualism (realigning biology with dominant gender). While we may choose to use any of these terms to categorize ourselves, we may come to understand ourselves better if we view each of these three zones within the greater spectrum of gender. The term “gender” has recently become accepted as defining one’s personal, social, and legal status independent of biological sex; e.g., ascribing traits of aggressiveness, nurturance, competitiveness, expressiveness, and so on.

Many people confuse sex with gender. Sex is biological, whereas gender is psychosocial. So if biology does not truly dictate gender or personality, then dichotomies of masculinity and femininity only serve to coerce or restrict the potential variety of ways of being human. “Until we redefine behavior in terms of human, rather than masculine or feminine, we are locked in a dance of death,” says Professor Anna Kuhn of the University of California at Davis.

*“The man whose spirit
has been obsessed
by a beauty so long
brooded upon, that he
has almost become
that which he contem-
plated...”*

—The Irish Poet, George
Russell

... androgyny provides both a vision of Utopia and a model of mental health... (it) does not require the individual to banish from the self whatever attributes and behaviors the culture may have stereotypically defined as inappropriate for his or her sex."

Transgenderism serves as a bridge of consciousness between crossdressers and transsexual people, who feel unnecessarily estranged within our own subculture. And in the vast majority of instances, we are not so much "gender conflicted" as we are at odds—even at war—with our culture. It is our culture that imposes the polarization of gender according to biology. It is our culture that has brainwashed us, and our families and friends, who might otherwise be able to love us and embrace our diversity as desirable and natural—something to be celebrated. Crossdressers are instead made to feel they must still be "men," but men who are deviant misfits, or even perverted fetishists. Transsexual people must often deny their maleness altogether and become stereotypical, second class females (a sad fact) in order to assimilate into society. Occasionally these options may be appropriate, but most often I doubt how conducive these forms of socialization are to personal growth and happiness.

I believe the truth of a solution to our dilemma is all-encompassing—not polarized. We know, deep in our hearts, that we are more than our culture dictates. We can reject those limitations, in all their manifestations, if we have a vision that transcends—if we believe we must go beyond. We need to recognize that each of us, in our own small way, are makers of our culture. We can exercise that function best by expressing our true selves—not by simply fulfilling our culture's expectations. We are all in transition, in that broad evolutionary sense.

Whether we are in any way gender-conflicted, or prone to the dictates of our culture, personal resolution need not be strictly an either/or proposition—male or female. Jungian June Singer noted that many people who become disturbed, sick, or unbalanced may be stuck in the masculine/feminine dichotomy. Psychologist George Kelly observed that disturbed peo-

ple tend to flip back and forth between the poles of their constructs rather than test midrange alternatives. Assagioli, a psychosynthesist, noticed that when our diverse inner elements no longer clash or remain unconnected, when they begin to merge, we experience a release of energy, a sense of well-being, and a greater depth of meaning. When it is balanced and healthy, human growth proceeds in all directions.

Androgyny is not a new concept, but it has recently returned to our cultural consciousness as an idea that holds great potential for personal and social development. It has been called "the eleventh megatrend." Sandra Bem, a pioneer in this field, says, "... androgyny provides both a vision of Utopia and a model of mental health... (it) does not require the individual to banish from the self whatever attributes and behaviors the culture may have stereotypically defined as inappropriate for his or her sex." In fact, the only time being male or female is of undeniable consequence is when reproducing. This is not to say that the psychosocial issues of gender are not important.

When considering the evolutionary potential of androgyny, it is worth noting the transitional form of polyandrogyny. This form encourages a full variety of options, including "pure" femininity and masculinity as well as any possible combination. Ultimately, more people may come to embrace a full range of psychological characteristics and social roles, which is monoandrogyny in the classic sense. Not to be confused with unisex, this would unleash far greater heterogeneity and uniqueness for each individual. Mention should be made that some people fail to exhibit traits of either gender. This is the "undifferentiated" category that is the antithesis of androgyny.

Author Elemire Zolla believes there may come a time when the unmitigated male or female will appear as disturbing as the unabashed androgyne of today—"a stifling denial of latencies." Plato

said, "Nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and the pursuit of the whole is called love." We must always begin by loving ourselves. The verb "to heal" means to make whole. Human life can be viewed as the constant process of healing an inner split. Jung called this process "individuation," the fundamental challenge of which is the integration of one's contrasexual elements through an active, ongoing dialogue between consciousness and the unconscious. Researchers have found that the most creative and brightest people have androgynous qualities, including greater maturity, social adjustment, and fuller enjoyment of sexuality. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow characterized peak experiences and self-actualization in terms of wholeness, unity, interconnectedness, and synergy. As psychiatrist Victor Frankl noted, "A higher dimension is simply a more inclusive dimension."

So what does androgyny have to do with transgenderism? Any person, mainstream and not particularly gender-conflicted, can opt for androgyny. Yet those of us who don't fit that description, who may still yearn to cross over, if only to return to a balanced state,

need to examine our options. Crossdressing may be a bold beginning (perhaps an end in itself), but nonetheless offers the potential for integration and wholeness. Transsexualism, while perfectly appropriate for some, may often be more of an overstated resolution—indeed, a form of escape. Trading one set of stereotypical gender restrictions for another is a denial of wholeness, unless one simply feels more centered in the gender of choice (given this culture), hence more able to strive for wholeness in that form. However, other transsexual people who may never realistically "pass" in society might find greater solace through androgyny.

I would like to offer a constructive challenge to those of us who are uncertain about defining ourselves as strictly crossdressers or transsexual people. Are you truly a crossdresser, or is this only an indication of far greater potential for gender evolution, which is turn a deeper imperative for personal growth and integration? If you believe yourself to be transsexual, are you losing as much ground as you are gaining? Are you unnecessarily sacrificing your preferred style of lovemaking, or your ability to procreate (especially if you're a lesbian)? Are you truly becoming

yourself, with a long-term life-plan intact, or are you allowing yourself to be compromised by external expectations? Our high-tech culture promises a quick fix, but there are significant health risks. Your life is precious, and good health is crucial. The freedom to choose one's gender is a potent sword that cuts both ways. Be true to yourself.

Androgyny, while offering the broadest opportunity for psychological integration and evolution, still poses a great threat as a cultural taboo. Since our culture is far less comfortable with ambiguity than stereotypic role-playing, the aspiring androgyne faces potentially greater resistance and rejection. But the transgenderist, whether crossing over part-time or full-time—even while masking their genital incongruity—gives honest expression to a reality that defies cultural norms. The resulting impacts on human potential, relationships, society, even global harmony and ecology, are still largely unexplored.

As our cultural consensus shifts to accommodate change and evolution, much can be achieved preventively through more enlightened socialization of our children. Indeed, many of the woes of this world may be resolved through gender liberation. ♀♂

Three Profiles of Transgenderism

The Advanced Crossdresser

Alexandra lives as a part-time fantasy, though too potent to be confined to the bedroom or strategically planned outings. She maintains her life as a male, for any number of reasons, but feels a deep need to explore the womanhood she knows is a profound part of her. She has grown past sexual fetishism, and has "come out" publicly into an expanded personhood, learning to deal with the inevitable challenges with family, spouse, children, friends, and career that our culture imposes.

The Androgyne

Alex, whether manifesting part- or full-time, does not always try to "pass." She is attuned to her inner being, which she recognizes as fully androgynous, and strives to live within that shifting, dynamic balance. She may seek her compromise through hormone therapy and/or a liberal expression of style in all her daily interactions—not to mention the fullest range of interpersonal and social relations she makes. S/he is, perhaps, a harbinger of our future.

The Pre-transsexual Person

Alexis rejects the lifestyle imposed on her as a male, and lives as a woman full-time. However, she feels content to retain her male genitals, though she may have breast augmentation and electrolysis in addition to hormone therapy. She may live as a lesbian, or in a "modified" straight relationship, but chooses her own definition of herself, short of conventional assimilation.