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## RITE OF PASSAGE: THE SECOND NEW WOMEN'S CONFERENCE (NWC)

by Dallas Denny

It was woman-only space, and nowhere was it more apparent that there were no men about than in the hot tub. Twenty-two naked female bodies, my own included, soaked and splashed and laughed, courting hyperthermia. Women with breasts big and small, skin white and tanned; stomachs flat and paunchy, inclined against the side of the tub, discussing their love lives, their careers, and especially the varied and many paths which had led them to the blood ritual which linked Twenty-One of them, and which had finally brought them here, to this seaside retreat in rural Massachusetts, this weekend in early September.

In all important ways, the Twenty-One were like any other group of socially and politically aware women. The only clue to their commonality, the incredible thing which they had shared, was their voices, which were on the average somewhat lower in pitch than those of other women. Their bodies, their names, their accomplishments, their problems, and even the foods they preferred were indistinguishable from the twenty-second, the lucky one. There between their legs was the Ancient Thing, the inverted V; there on their hips was cellulite; there on their plates were New-Age wonders concocted from straw mushrooms and almonds and whole grains and coconut by Mirabai, the retreat's cook, who was another of the lucky ones.

Mirabai and the twenty-second woman were lucky, because they came about their womanhood by birthright, growing into it logically and naturally, with support of friends and family. The Twenty-One had not had that advantage. They had acquired their womanhood in the face of great adversity, loss, pain, and expense, dedicating years and sometimes decades to the pursuit. And yet they too were lucky ones, for they had reached their goal, had shared the blood ritual, had grown in spirit and personhood because of the adversity. There were too, too many who had not and never would. On Friday night, sitting in a circle, each of the Twenty-One blew out a candle for those who hadn't been so fortunate, who had fallen by the wayside, victims of suicide, of murder, of car accident, of cancer, who had not made it to and through the blood ritual. And then each lit a candle for someone who was just starting out or for someone who had become lost on what has to be one of the most difficult paths for a human being to walk. The room, which had

gradually fallen into darkness and sadness, once again began to lighten as the flames bravely, hopefully, began to burn.

The blood ritual these women shared had taken place individually, often years and thousands of miles apart. Most had been alone, alienated from friends and families, when the blood flowed, and had still been alone when they had awakened, healed in body. Now they were in pursuit of a healing of spirit and mind. Now they were sharing their lifetimes of pain and the triumphs and the difficulties of their lives as women in a patriarchal society. Now, they were ceremonializing the end of the past and the beginning of the future. In a ritual on Sunday morning, the Twenty-One, bound in a soft red twine which symbolized their physical conversion via surgery and the menstrual blood they would forever be denied, formed a circle, welcoming the newest women into the company of those who were almost as new, and those who had been new for decades. The twenty-second woman, a twenty-third, also one of the lucky ones, and a twenty-fourth woman, a physician who was perhaps on the way, but had not yet made the blood sacrifice, looked on in support and wonder as the cord, the red umbilicus, was cut, freeing each participant to go back into the workaday world. Suddenly, there were planes to catch, lawns to mow, deadlines to meet, mountains to move. The conference was over.

I've been describing the Second Annual New Woman's Conference, a meeting of postoperative transsexual women—that is, women who've once been considered by the world to be men, who had had penises, who had experienced what practically everyone at the conference described as “testosterone poisoning.” All had legally and physically and socially become women, and all had paid the price—alienation from friends, estrangement from their parents and children, loss of income, estrogen-related and surgery-related health problems, ridicule and ill-will from strangers. Some were still paying the price, being harassed by those who knew of their past lives, being ignored or snubbed by family and old friends. One had been ejected in 1991 from the 16th Annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, under suspicion that she was transsexual (the festival promoters couldn't prove it, and didn't feel the need to; they thought she looked transsexual, and out she went—something which should alarm all but the most feminine “women-born-women” who plan to attend next year's event, for they may find that a panty and ID check won't save them, if they are pegged as transsexual).

The subject of transsexual women in woman-only events is a sticky one. Despite evidence that most women consider transsexual women to be women and do not wish them excluded, a small but vocal minority cry for transsexual disenfranchisement. They are fueled by *The Transsexual*

*Empire*, an incredibly biased and hateful book by Janice Raymond. Raymond's laughable thesis was that transsexualism is a plot by male doctors to manufacture superior women, making "real" women obsolete. This completely ignores the reality that transsexual women will go to whatever lengths they find necessary to achieve feminization, even to the point of blackmailing doctors by threats of suicide or, if all else fails, by operating on themselves with *Gray's Anatomy* in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other. Arguments for transsexual exclusion are often, like Raymond's, logically faulty, ranging from the now-discredited chromosome test (there are considerable numbers of women with XY chromosomal structure), to "male prestige" (something the transsexual person certainly never enjoyed and has just as certainly permanently given up) to lack of menstruation or fertility (criteria which would exclude tens of million of women of childbearing age, and all above or below childbearing age). Unfortunately, such folly is often taken seriously by otherwise intelligent persons.

If transsexual people are discriminated against by the far left, they are shunned and persecuted and sometimes murdered by the far right and by society-at-large, which I sometimes think of as the same thing as the far right. Many transsexual women have trouble finding employment, joining a church, or establishing a circle of nontransgendered friends, so long as people "know." Being transsexual can be physically dangerous at times; three transsexual women were found murdered in Atlanta last year.

Every transsexual person lives with the reality of being hated for what he or she is rather than what he or she has done. The Twenty-One, sitting in the circle which characterized all of their comings together, discussed how "out" to be, concluding that one does whatever one thinks is right. Some, like Merissa Sherrill Lynn and Anne, who proudly wears a t-shirt with the caption "Sex Change," are, because of their activism, completely out about their transsexualism; others had been active for a time, eventually distancing themselves as much as possible from their transsexual sisters (but needing to talk and visit with them badly enough to fly or drive across the country to attend the Conference). One was in "stealth mode," decrying any sort of transsexual activism. The group had no value judgments.

Most Americans tend to think of transsexualism as a new thing, but it is ancient and polycultural. Rena Swifthawk, one of the Twenty-One, is an Ute Indian, a shaman, who had to reintroduce the concept of gender diversity to a tribe whose oral traditions had been decimated in the last century by disease and the U.S. Cavalry. At last year's conference, Rena picked up a burning ember from a campfire and put it in her mouth. Participants saw the inside of her mouth glow as she performed a healing ceremony on a

woman with leukemia, which last year's participants swear is now in remission. This year, one of the Twenty-One, an Episcopalian nun who runs the world's largest and most often accessed AIDS-related computer bulletin board out of her bedroom, conducted a beautiful ceremony by the retreat's waterfall. Rena and Merissa and I found our way to the ocean's edge, where Rena conducted an equally beautiful ceremony, giving Merissa and I and then herself a ritual smudging with sweetgrass and eagle feather as the tide, the blood of Grandmother Earth, came in at our feet.

Modern technology has given us the medical means to help those who don't want and who have never wanted to be men (or women) to transform their bodies, making them very like the bodies of other women (or men). The requirement for attending the Conference—that one have had male-to-female sex reassignment surgery, is one that I find offensive, for it is not penises and vaginas, but our gender identity and role, which gives us our gender. Our society, and transsexual people are no exception, continues to equate manhood and womanhood with penises and vaginas, even though others rarely see our genitals. Many transsexual women are unable, for health or financial reasons, to have surgery; others simply choose not to. They are no less women, and I would have liked to have seen them at this year's Conference. The actual process of surgery provides, like the clitoridectomy or circumcision practiced at adolescence in some cultures, a concrete event on which to "hang" the ritual which was of such importance for the Twenty-One. The surgery is not without complications, and many of the Twenty-One had need of private consultation with a physician, herself transgendered, who visited specifically to help them with surgery-related problems and questions. Those who have had sex reassignment surgery have questions that those who have not will not have; there were frank discussions of dilation (a process required to keep the neovagina open), of orgasm, of douching, of sexual intercourse.

It was politically correct to wear no, or at most minimal, makeup at the New Woman's Conference. Many of the women were out about their lesbianism, others about their bisexuality. Those who were exclusively heterosexual in their new role (i.e., attracted only to men) were a clear minority. Participants were free to be themselves, free to admit and embrace their sexual preferences, free to dress and behave in less than stereotypically feminine ways, free to admit that yes, at one time they had been sexually aroused by crossdressing or had felt moments of pride in being a man. There was no self-consciousness as Merissa and I led voices into low notes with our guitars.

Shorts and tank tops were the order of the day, and physical closeness

the norm. The sexual attraction some of the participants felt towards others was expressed freely; in fact, some of the participants are permanently paired. There was an atmosphere of sisterhood, of belongingness, and I emphatically reiterate that it was woman-only space. No men were present. There were no overriding egos, no talk of things rather than feelings, no rigid imposed structure. The event flowed and ebbed as it would. The participants, all of whom had long histories of telling themselves and of being told by society that they do not belong, did belong, for four glorious days, and I was glad to be one of the twenty-two women who shared in the joy and caring. It was an incredible experience.

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*Dallas Denny is the executive director of AEGIS and a board member of HOAI. The New Woman Conference was a program created by HOAI in 1991 to help New Women (postoperative transsexuals) network and share mutual interests and concerns. For more information, write NWC, PO Box 67, South Berwick, ME 03908.*



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